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**Political Ethics and the Spirit of Liberalism in Twentieth Century Political Thought**

A Dissertation Presented

by

Joshua Laurence Cherniss

to

The Department of Government

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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**Political Ethics and the Spirit of Liberalism in Twentieth Century Political Thought**

**Abstract**

Liberalism is often criticized as too moralistic and removed from the realities of politics; and too complacently accepting of injustices. Such criticisms, familiar among contemporary political theorists, were expressed far more forcefully in the earlier twentieth century. Liberalism then came under attack from anti-liberals who wholly rejected the institutional and ethical limits on the political deployment of violence and fear insisted upon by liberals. Such anti-liberals advanced arguments for political ruthlessness on behalf of a truer morality – either the morality of pursuing morally imperative political goals; or the morality of “realistically” responding to threats to public order. Liberals found themselves faced with a dilemma: to adhere to their principles at the price of hampering their ability to combat both existing injustices, and the threat posed by ruthless anti-liberal movements; or to abandon their scruples in seeking to defend, or transform, liberal society.

The criticisms and challenges confronting liberalism between the end of World War I, and the end of the Cold War, thus centered on opposing responses to problems of political ethics. They were also shaped by opposed ideals of political *ethos* – the “spirit”, dispositions of character, sensibility and patterns of perception and response, which characterize the way in which actors pursue their values and goals in practice.

In this dissertation I reconstruct these debates, and explicate the ethical claims and questions involved, presenting accounts of the opposed – yet often convergent – positions of moral purism, end-maximalism, and realism. I offer accounts of the ethical arguments and ethos of such anti-liberals as Lenin, Trotsky, and Lukacs; and explore the ambivalent commitments and

ambiguous arguments of Max Weber, who influenced both critics and defenders of liberalism. Finally, and primarily, I reconstruct the ethical arguments and ethos of “tempered liberalism” – a strain of liberalism, represented by Reinhold Niebuhr, Isaiah Berlin, and Adam Michnik, which sought to re-imagine liberalism as an ethos which rejected both the innocence and complacency of some earlier liberalisms, and the ruthlessness of anti-liberalism, and steered a “moderate” ethical path between hard-headed, skeptical realism, and values of individual integrity and idealism.

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The flaws of the work that follows – as well as the amount of time and words it took me to get it out – are my responsibility alone.

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Now a final word, in a different register. This project has involved a journey not only through the usual challenges of intellectual activity and academic work, but through the horrors and perplexities of twentieth-century politics – and the larger dilemmas and puzzles these provoke. I owe a debt to those who kept my spirits up through this process. I also owe another sort of debt to those whose thoughts and examples provided beacons of inspiration and hope, and models of how to retain impulses of decency and gifts of lucidity, in the midst of such difficulties – who offered models of how to keep one's head, and not lose heart. Many of them figure in the text that follows, whether at length or in passing; some – those it has been my privilege to know personally – have also been named above. My debt to them is deeply personal, and also more than purely personal. They recall Auden's reminder that, for all the folly and agony that we inflict on ourselves,

*“Yet, dotted everywhere,  
Ironic points of light,  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages:  
May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair  
Show an affirming flame”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. Auden, “September 1, 1939”

## Preface

*[W]e should be unduly rigorous if we were to wait for perfectly elaborated principles before speaking philosophically of politics. In the crucible of events we become aware of what is not acceptable to us, and it is this experience as interpreted that becomes both thesis and philosophy. We are thus allowed to report our experience frankly with all its false starts, its omissions, its disparities, and with the possibility of revisions at a later date ... samplings, probings, philosophical anecdotes, the beginnings of analyses, in short, the continual rumination which goes on in the course of reading, personal meetings, and current events ... If history does not have a direction, like a river, but has a meaning, if it teaches us, not a truth, but errors to avoid, if its practice is not deduced from a dogmatic philosophy of history, then it is not superficial to base a politics on the analysis of the political man.<sup>2</sup>*

*“Those who know What Is To Be Done or What Is To Be Thought make fun of this intolerable anguish. But I think it would be better, instead of jeering at it, to try to understand and clarify this anguish, see what it means, interpret its quasi-total rejection of a world which provokes it, and trace out the feeble hope that suffuses it.”<sup>3</sup>*

This work is concerned with two broad, interwoven themes. The first is the confrontation of liberal principles and practice with political realities – violence, fear, oppression, intolerance – which are antithetical to liberalism; and the challenges involved in defending liberalism against a certain sort of anti-liberal critique, which rejects liberals' objections to these political realities as invalid. The second is the problem of political ethics -- the struggle to make sense both of the tensions between moral principles and political realities, and of the complicated relationship between means and ends in political action.

As I am concerned with the interweaving of two broad themes, my inquiry also has several, intersecting goals. The first is to reveal the centrality of questions of political ethics – and of the spirit, or “ethos”, which characterizes individual political deliberation and guides political action – to a particular chapter in the history of political thought: the attacks on and defenses of liberalism that marked much of the twentieth century. Second, I reconstruct – and so, recover – a particular strain of

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (Northwestern University Press, 1973), 3, 28

<sup>3</sup> Albert Camus, “Neither Victims nor Executioners”, [1946], trans Dwight Macdonald (New Society Publishers, 1986), 36

liberalism. This liberalism begins with and takes seriously the challenges of liberalism's most troubling critics; it is concerned with the ethical problems presented by engaging in a life of political action; it is animated by a sense of the difficulty and importance of dealing with those problems within a theory of politics; and it responds to these challenges through the articulation of a political *ethos*.<sup>4</sup> Finally, I seek to contribute to our understanding of the moral phenomena of twentieth-century politics – and, I believe, politics more broadly – by telling a story about the moral psychology of political action. This is a story, in part, of how terrible evil can grow out of idealism, benevolence, and ethical conscientiousness – and how both ideological illusions, and a “realistic” confrontation with political realities, can contribute to this transformation of good into evil. It is a story about the danger posed by ruthless, even murderous, idealists – those who do great evil for the sake of great goods.

Each of my goals involves a mix of historical and conceptual or normative questions and claims. This feature of my approach – combined with my particular concern with the roots of political ruthlessness in different forms of moral idealism and political principle – reflects a conviction that political theory should be deeply engaged with the practice of politics; should be shaped by a historical frame of reference and marked by psychological sensitivity; and should seek to understand the recurrent dangers of political life. There are many of these, and some of the most common and familiar are very different than the perversion of idealism. Simple villainy is worth stressing, studying, and bearing in mind when thinking about politics. But, for those of us who are particularly concerned with questions of political morality – and are inclined to take a moral (or moralizing) stance in relation to politics – the problem of the ruthless “idealist fanatic” is particularly troubling and fascinating. As the Polish dissident Adam Michnik has observed,

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to claim that adherence to the ethos I identify with the defense of liberalism here is either necessary or sufficient for identification as being a liberal. Nor do I mean to claim that such an ethos is unique to liberalism. This ethos was linked to liberalism by some liberals, and not others; and the same or strikingly similar qualities of ethos were advocated or exhibited by many whose ideological commitments diverged from liberalism. I return to this issue in the conclusion.

the scoundrel is less interesting – he appears wherever one can fish in murky waters, get rich by informing on others, get promoted through intrigue, get famous by kicking someone who is down ... more fascinating are the strong people, the honest ones, the idealistic, who are blinded by the drug of revolution and transformed into skillful manipulators, cynics of the political game, demagogues of fluent speech and dried-up heart – people of a religious sect transformed into [a] gang of bandits.<sup>5</sup>

My concern here is thus with the vices of virtue. But my purpose is not purely diagnostic, and my perspective not purely negative. This is also an inquiry into how some of these same impulses – the combination of a will to do good, a sense of personal ethical responsibility, and, connected to these, a conscientious and clear-eyed estimation of political realities – may be cultivated and guided in ways that conduce to the opposite: in other words, how political actors can learn how *not* to be (or go about being) good – and how, thereby, they may learn how to be good in the challenging circumstances of politics.

In seeking to address problems in political ethics through an exploration of history, while simultaneously illuminating the history of political thought in the twentieth century through attention to moral psychology and ethics, I have necessarily found myself mixing the particular and the general: I seek to reconstruct the political and ethical predicaments confronting specific groups of participants in ways that both convey the particular circumstances, motivations and assumptions of those participants, while also illuminating recurrent – even perennial – issues that were manifested in these moments. Such a project requires, not only connecting general questions and abstract arguments to the complicated circumstances that gave them rise, but retracing – to a degree, recreating – the complex, sometimes confused, conflicted, or tormented, grappling of historical actors who were also creative and engaged political thinkers.

While my approach will often be contextual and discursive, the main claims of my argument can be summed up in outline form:

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<sup>5</sup> Adam Michnik, *The Trouble with History*, ed. Irena Grudzinska Gross (Yale University Press, 2014) 72-3, 75

First, political discourse, thought, and action in the first half of the twentieth century was to a large degree dominated by “anti-liberal” attacks on liberalism. This “anti-liberalism” was marked by a conception of politics as a field of decisive, zero-sum combat between implacable, irreconcilably opposed enemies; the cultivation of strict discipline and control; and an embrace of ruthlessness in the pursuit of ideological goals.

Second, the most theoretically challenging and troubling attacks on liberalism were justified – and very often motivated – by appeal to arguments about political ethics. These arguments took the form, both of general claims about the types of behavior, reasoning, and character appropriate to politics; and of claims about the fatal tensions between liberalism's avowed ideals and its practice. The *anti-liberal challenge* was that liberals – whether out of weakness, venality and hypocrisy confusion, or cowardice – were committed to political practices which blocked the realization of the ideals to which they claimed to be devoted (or, ideals that liberals *should* affirm, given the implications of their own commitments); and, at the same time, that the ways in which liberals approached political action failed to recognize the basic realities – the essential character – of politics.

Third, the *ethical* challenges posed by anti-liberal politics presented liberals with a two-pronged challenge (“the liberal predicament”). On one hand, those who remained attached to liberalism had to vindicate their commitments against the ethical critiques advanced by anti-liberals. On the other, they had to determine how (or whether) they could effectively combat political movements which did not abide by the limitations on acceptable political action insisted upon by liberalism – without betraying those principles. To maintain the purity of commitment to liberal principles of conduct seemed, at moments, to threaten the continuing existence of liberal democracy; but to emulate the means of their opponents appeared to constitute a betrayal of liberalism's essence.<sup>6</sup> In responding to the ethical

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<sup>6</sup> This formulation of the problem in terms of the conflicting claims of existence and essence is taken from Nomi Claire Lazar, *States of Emergency in Liberal Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

challenges presented by anti-liberalism, liberal theorists were impelled to find a way of thinking about the ethics of political action that could explain why the alternative ethical stances of *ruthlessness* in the use of force, and maintaining personal moral *purity* regardless of the political consequences, should both be rejected. Their attempts to respond to this challenge led to an important, albeit negative, insight: the way in which various forms of ruthlessness could result from different sorts of attempts to “purify” political life – either by seeking to purge political and social life of evils and realize some ultimate, overriding aim; or by insisting on absolute fidelity to principles of personal moral purity, even to the point of abandoning responsibilities to and for others; or by excluding moral considerations altogether, thus rendering politics a realm of “pure” power. Liberals responding to the ethical challenges of anti-liberalism had to find a way to avoid each of these tendencies without falling prey to one of the others.

Fourth, the reconstruction of liberalism in the face of the anti-liberal challenge and the liberal predicament centered on articulating and advocating – and, very often, exemplifying – a particular *spirit or ethos*, a set of motivations, dispositions, and patterns of response, in approaching political issues. This ethos was both politically responsible, and ethically scrupulous; it refused to accept or inflict certain sorts of degradation in pursuit of political goals, while also recognizing that it is impossible, in political action, to remain entirely pure.

Drawing on an analysis of liberal responses to the ethical challenges posed by anti-liberalism, I advance two larger arguments about how we might engage in the activity of political theory today. First, my account reveals the importance of attending to the dimension of *ethos* (as a complement to principles of moral conduct and institutional operation), both for understanding the strengths and limitations of liberalism, and for thinking about the claims and demands of political ethics. Second, I argue that we should see liberalism as connected to the cultivation of a particular ethos, one which understands politics as an ethically-laden activity which demands steering a course between extremes –



a course marked out by certain moral limits, but also one guided by features of ethos as opposed to propositional principles.<sup>7</sup>

This argument for linking liberalism more firmly to reflection on the ethics of political activity, and to a particular ethos guiding the way in which we engage in political activity, is tied to another contribution that this project aims to make to our thinking about politics. This is to shed light on, and bring into sharper focus, “another liberalism”<sup>8</sup> from that most commonly encountered in discussions of liberal theory. It is distinctive, not only in centering on the cultivation of a particular sort of ethical sensibility and political outlook or world-view, but in its approach to the task of political theory, and its substantive concerns. This liberalism is, first, *negative* in its initial motivation, taking as its starting point the challenges presented by anti-liberalism, in terms of which it defines itself. Connected to this, its approach to political theory is *prophylactic* rather than legitimating or utopian. It does not seek to justify an existing order, or to establish conditions that a political system must fulfill in order to be regarded as legitimate; or identify the features of (and path to) an ideal political order. It sees its task as warning against central dangers which threaten to dominate political life, and prescribing ways of averting or combating these dangers; it bears in mind Adam Michnik's warning that in thinking about political action, we should view “our infirmities and our miseries from the perspective of dangers and not solely from the perspective of demands and goals.”<sup>9</sup> This liberalism is also *chastened* in its self-understanding and conception of politics; *worldly* in its stress on the importance of understanding and

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<sup>7</sup> Both my general approach here, and some of the themes and dispositions I stress, closely resemble several other works: Jonathan Allen, “The Place of Negative Morality in Political Theory”, *Political Theory* 29:3 (June 2001), 337-63; Jason A. Scorza, *Strong Liberalism: Habits of Mind for Democratic Citizenship* (Tufts University Press, 2007); and (with reference to the same period and strain of liberalism I discuss here) Jan-Werner Mueller, “Fear and Freedom: On ‘Cold War Liberalism’”, *European Journal of Political Theory* 7:1 (2008), 45-64.

<sup>8</sup> To borrow a phrase from both Nancy Rosenblum and Jan-Werner Mueller (Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism: Romanticism and the Reconstruction of Liberal Thought* [Harvard University Press, 1987]; Mueller, *Furcht und Freiheit: Ein anderer Liberalismus* [Suhrkamp, 2011]).

<sup>9</sup> Michnik, “Maggots and Angels”, in idem., *Letters from Prison*, trans. trans Maya Litinski (University of California Press, 1987), 188

acting within specific political realities; and, as indicated above, *ethical* in its focus on matters of individual character, temperament, and political choice. For shorthand, I will refer to this as a *tempered* liberalism: for it is a liberalism tempered by criticism, struggle, and tribulation; a liberalism which seeks to maintain a poise of balance between extremes, which is also informed by those extremes; and a liberalism that is concerned with, and a matter of, personal temperament.

The goal of steering a course between ruthlessness and purity, utopianism and resignation, cynical “realism” and blind, dogmatic “idealism”, is (arguably) desirable in any political movement, actor, or ethic. But it is particularly important for – and should be particularly attractive to – liberals, who (for reasons explained below) will be particularly sensitive to the dangers of political extremes. But what I identify with the ethos and ethical perspective of the liberalism I discuss here is neither entailed by, nor necessitates, an affirmation of liberalism as a political theory. Those who are convinced by the ethical arguments presented here will not necessarily feel compelled to fully embrace liberalism (if they do not do so already). But they will be inclined, I suspect, to end up feeling at least sympathetic to it, and will incorporate a liberal politics into their own theory and practice to a considerable degree.<sup>10</sup>

What follows therefore is not a systematic justification of liberalism; nor is it intended to offer a knock-down vindication of liberalism against all adversaries and alternatives. It does seek to offer a defense – and reformulation – of liberalism against some of its fiercest detractors and enemies, and a penetrating criticism of the ethical outlook and ethos of those anti-liberals. This, again, will not be enough to make the uncommitted or resistant reader a convert to liberalism. But I hope to convince her to grant the impulses behind and dilemmas faced by liberalism considerable sympathy. I also hope to dissuade my readers from – or inoculate them against – the temptations of fanaticism and extremism in both ethics and politics, whether these lead to a “puristic” disavowal (or denial) of the difficulties of

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<sup>10</sup> I return to the issue of the relationship between liberalism, reflection on ethos, and the particular ethos articulated here, in the conclusion.

politics, or to a ruthless, “maximalist” approach to politics. And I hope that by showing the links of reliance and support between liberalism and a political ethic of principled, scrupulous realism, I may also help some readers to preserve themselves against both utopian hubris and despairing cynicism (the latter of which often grows out of the disappointment of the former), to avoid the impotence and blindness of purism, and to better guard against the horrors of ruthlessness and fanaticism.

Here the method – one might better say, style – of my discussion is inseparable from, and important to, the goal. Lionel Trilling articulated the purpose of his writings as being to recall the liberalism of his time to its “first essential imagination of ... variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.”<sup>11</sup> The purpose of this study – which examines the concerns and commitments of which Trilling's work was an expression, and the tendency of which it was a part – is the same: and my approach therefore stresses, and seeks to convey, the variousness, possibilities, complexities, and difficulties encountered, and generated, by those whose work I discuss.

It also seeks to connect thought – much of it conducted at a fairly high level of abstraction – to life; and general principles and political choices to personal experience. This requires an approach which is more discursive – or just untidy – than that which is often (and fruitfully) cultivated in works of political theory. Given both the problems, and the sort of response to them, with which I am concerned, the twists and turns on the way to “the point” are themselves part of the point. This is partly because I am concerned with the messy area (or, to again borrow from Trilling, the “bloody crossroads”) in which politics and ethics, abstraction and experience, character and society intersect. It is also because, in an argument about the danger and delusiveness of the idea of “purity” (in the various forms it takes), a method that is neither purely philosophical, nor purely historical – one guided neither by pure logic, nor pure experience – seems appropriate. My use of the concept of political ethos, and my focus on the phenomena that this concept seeks to capture and draw together, reflects this concern

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<sup>11</sup> Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York Review Books, 2008 [1950]), xxi

with the links between reflective belief, psychological disposition, and action in (and reaction to) the world of politics. So does the focus on exemplary individual figures which structures the main part of this study. Through these studies I aim not only to verify the centrality of a concern with ethos among a certain group of liberals, but to trace the content of a liberal ethos through examination of the dispositions, style, bearing, and conduct exhibited by these individual thinkers.

There is an irreducibly personal element to this approach – and to the selection of liberalism and the twentieth century as points of orientation. I myself am committed to the main values and ends of liberalism, as I understand them, and at least provisionally committed to liberalism's institutional prescriptions. The reasons for this in turn have a great deal to do with the role played by the history of the twentieth century (or, at least, my own perception of this history) in forming my political consciousness. Such features of orientation are not unreflective or unalterable, but they are inescapable. To adopt a normative stance neutral with regard to liberalism would be disingenuous; to adopt a mode of analysis which abstracted entirely from twentieth century political experience would be to cut myself off from my own intellectual roots. The concern with the ethics of political action that propels this project is also a feature of my outlook. But this concern also seems to me to be a matter of importance for anyone who is a member of a political society, who is concerned with living morally, and who believes that these things have something to do with one another – and that *thinking* about the relationship between moral life and politics is a necessary part of both living morally and being a political agent.

But why should the ethically-concerned citizen look for answers – or, at least, matter for reflection – in the pages of twentieth-century political history and thought? The answer is, in part, that the concerns of the past century are lamentably relevant. While changes in technology, demographics, the workings of the economy, and the global political order have created a significantly different – and in some respects even more unstable – world, many of the basic conditions, and many of the prevalent

patterns, of twentieth century politics remain with us. The mid-century world of economic collapse, cultural despair, and ever-looming war seems strikingly familiar to us now. Furthermore, our political thought and sentiments have not entirely recovered from the moral trauma and ideological enchantment of that earlier age. Twentieth century politics are, as Stephen Daedalus said of history, the nightmare from which we are still trying to awake – and into which we often seem to be sinking more deeply. Political theory, and moral inquiry, should not shrink from confronting that nightmare; in doing so, they may be greatly helped by those who lived through it – and in whom it effected an awakening to a more chastened and anxious, but also more scrupulous, responsible, and humane understanding of the demands and possibilities of politics and morality.

## **Introduction: Political Ethics in the Twentieth Century: Anti-liberalism as a Moral Problem, Liberalism as an Ethical Project**

As indicated in the Preface, I am here concerned with both historical and normative questions: questions about the sorts of challenges to which liberalism was subjected over the course of the twentieth century; about the relationship between these challenges, and larger questions concerning the ethics of political practice; about the role played in attacks on and defenses of liberalism by conceptions of political ethos; and about *how* liberals *should* respond to the political-ethical challenges they faced (and continue to face).

Over the ensuing chapters, I will explore these questions and themes, and tie them together, through examination of the ideas – and the practical-political responses, judgments, and actions – of individuals, who grappled with these issues both more abstractly, and within the course of engagement in particular political struggles. This approach will blend intellectual and political biography – a reconstruction of the developing ideas, and political engagements and allegiances of particular individuals – with conceptual mapping and analysis at a more abstract level; the goal will be to show the interweaving of ethical reflection and “real politics”. In this first, introductory chapter, I take a somewhat different approach, though one which still seeks to keep generalizing theory in contact with individual experience. I seek both to reconstruct larger trends or patterns of response to the particular ethical challenges presented by the politics of ideological violence which dominated European politics from the end of World War I through the Cold War; and to construct a conceptual framework for analyzing the political-ethical positions and problems at the heart of these understandings.

In Part I, I present an account of the political-ethical terrain and problems with which I am concerned in broad terms. While the focus is on political movements which were defined – in

the eyes of proponents and opponents – by their rejection of liberal norms, I am here concerned with bringing out more general ethical phenomena of ruthlessness, and various rationales and moral or ideological motivations for ruthlessness, as well as the challenges involved in resisting ruthlessness. In Part II, I turn to show how these general moral arguments and problems are relevant to the struggles between liberalism and anti-liberalism, setting out the basis for the argument that this ideological conflict hinged on divergent views about political ethics. This involves further reconstructing the ethical arguments against liberalism and for a distinctive “anti-liberal” model of politics: one morally-inspired yet “realistically” pragmatic in its focus on and pursuit of power, maximalist in its goals and ruthless in its conduct. It also involves explicating the particular moral dilemma posed for liberal thinking and practice by anti-liberal arguments and action. In Part III I re-frame this discussion through the concept of political “ethos”. In addition to an analysis of the concept of ethos, I begin to make the case – substantiated over subsequent chapters – that the conflict between liberals and anti-liberals represented an engagement not only over the morality of political action, but also over what ethos to embrace and foster in the course of political action.<sup>1</sup>

These themes and claims will be developed through a close examination of individual figures in subsequent chapters. What follows is meant to sketch out the conceptual terrain in which the protagonists of subsequent chapters will be located – though in doing so I will also be relying on the testimony and examples of individuals; the only basis on which, it seems to me, the pith of political-ethical problems can be fully grasped.

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<sup>1</sup>There is a certain amount of repetition between these three steps in my exposition. Despite the cost (to my reader) involved in repeating certain arguments, I have separated my account into these three parts so as to bring out clearly the distinction as well as the connection between the different strands in my discussion – the ethical problem of principled or ideal-inspired ruthlessness; the centrality of ethical questions to the historical clash between liberalism and anti-liberalism; and the definitive role of ethos in both liberal and anti-liberal positions and responses to ethical problems.

**Part I. “Squeamishness is the Crime”:**  
**Moral-Ideological Ruthlessness and the Story of Twentieth Century Politics**

*Incorrect merciful impulses postpone the cleansing that precedes reform. Short-term niceties must yield to long-range necessity. Morals will be revised to meet the requirements of today. Meaningless platitudes will be pulled from tongues and minds ... The greatest danger is not excessive zeal but undue hesitation ... Squeamishness is the crime.*<sup>2</sup>

*Out of the air a voice without a face  
Proved by statistics that some cause was just  
In tones as dry and level as the place:  
No one was cheered and nothing was discussed;  
Column by column in a cloud of dust  
They marched away enduring a belief  
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.*<sup>3</sup>

*Anyone desiring a quiet life has done badly to be born in the twentieth century*<sup>4</sup>

That the twentieth-century was a time of horrific violence and vast upheaval is a dismal commonplace – though one that bears repeating, and demands ever-renewed efforts at understanding how it happened. Human history is full of crimes, miseries and follies that many of us would like (and have managed) to forget – and which the perpetrators would like (and have often managed) to hide. It is hard – and probably pointless – to award comparative points for horror. Nevertheless, we should take seriously the feeling, voiced by many who lived through it, that the twentieth was, as Isaiah Berlin declared, “the most terrible century in Western history” – a sentiment which reflects the fact that (as Berlin's cousin Yehudi Menuhin remarked) the century “raised the greatest hopes ever conceived by humanity, and destroyed all illusions and

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<sup>2</sup> Jenny Holzer, “Inflammatory Essays” 1978-9. Holzer's text incorporates quotes from twentieth-century figures such as Lenin, Trotsky, Hitler, and Mao.

<sup>3</sup> W. H. Auden, “The Shield of Achilles”

<sup>4</sup> Paraphrase of Leon Trotsky in Isaiah Berlin, “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century”, in Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford University Press, 2002), 55.



ideals.<sup>5</sup> The scale and intensity of suffering and degradation – and the contrast of this misery with both the expectations with which the century began (and, strangely, ended), and the comforts enjoyed by many – must strike us as truly extraordinary.

If we believe (contrary to Virginia Woolf, and some of the more triumphalist voices to emerge after the fall of Soviet Communism) that human nature does not change overnight, and history has not and will not “end”, it is vital to understand how and why the twentieth century developed as it did. It is vital, in order to estimate as best we can, whether or how far we are in danger of repeating this loathsome and lamentable history – and how we might be able to avoid doing so.<sup>6</sup> There is no simple answer to the questions of “why” people acted as they did, and perhaps the best response would be a detailed accounting of exactly *how* it happened. But there is also value in more generalizing interpretations, from which we may draw some (tentative) conclusions – so long as these accounts recognize their own limitations.

Generalizing drastically, then, we can attribute much of the atrocity of the twentieth century to the combination of deep-seated human propensities to hatred and fear, domination and subjugation, of others, with the technological advances of modern society (including not only advances in mechanical technology, but also in the technology of administration and control that typifies the modern state).<sup>7</sup> But such a characterization neglects a distinctive feature of much of

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<sup>5</sup> Quotes from Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 1-2. Hobsbawm's is among several books which offer vital documentation and analysis of the twentieth-century's paradoxes and disasters. Others of particular importance include Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (Vintage 2000) and Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (Basic Books, 2012); and (on political ideas) Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Even if we leave aside this practical objective, it seems to me vital to offer as accurate and perceptive accounting of the twentieth century – and other periods – as we can. Those who suffered and died, and those who resisted, deserve such an accounting; and historical understanding has its own, intrinsic value. I do not, however, expect every reader to share these intuitions; I hope most can be brought to share the view defended in the text.

<sup>7</sup> This combination of perennial moral-psychological tendencies and modern technology is the explanation offered in the conclusion of Jonathan Glover's *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (Yale University

the violence inflicted in the twentieth century – one recognized by perceptive observers at the time. This is the way in which the atrocities of the twentieth century were inspired by the combination of a “realist” conception of the nature of politics, and an “absolutist” understanding of the demands of morality.<sup>8</sup> These facilitated the tendency to regard the lives of others as cheap – or, at any rate, as prices well worth incurring for the sake of far more important goals or principles. In this first section, I will attempt to illustrate this phenomenon, and to show how a politics of ideologically and morally-inspired ruthlessness was plausible – and why even many who recoiled from it found it difficult to refute.

### **A. Camus's Insight: The Problem of Moral-Ideological Ruthlessness**

Looking back on the previous half-century in 1951, Albert Camus sought to make sense of a period which “within fifty years, uproots, enslaves or kills seventy million human beings”. He concluded that what distinguished his time from past epochs was the predominance of “crimes of logic”. There was nothing new about slave camps, massacres, murders. What was novel was the paradox of “slave camps under the flag of freedom, massacres justified by philanthropy or the taste for the superhuman”, and crime wearing “the apparel of innocence”. The world was one in which “logic is more important than scruples”, and “murder is legitimate,

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Press, 1999)– a work far richer than this conclusion indicates, and to which my own account is deeply indebted.

<sup>8</sup> The terms “moral/morality” and “ethics/ethical” are often used interchangeably; there is no fixed meaning to either, and their existence side-by-side in our vocabulary reflects no more than the fact that English has inherited vocabulary from both Latin and Greek. However, here I will, when writing in my own voice, use “moral” to refer to questions and claims concerning what individuals owe to one another, and how they ought to act toward one another; and ethics to refer to questions and claims concerning “what to be and do” – which encompasses questions of both 1) what sorts of individual character and ways of life are good or bad, desirable or undesirable, praiseworthy or contemptible; and 2) how individuals ought to act within particular situations and roles. In the former case, “ethics” is distinguished from morality primarily in focusing more on questions of character, and in terms of patterns of action and habits of bearing rather than particular, individual actions toward others. In the second case, it is concerned, like morality, with questions of actions toward others, but approaches these in relation to conceptions of character, bearing, and larger patterns of life, rather than in relation to conceptions of obligation and right which are independent of these.

and ... human life is considered trifling”.<sup>9</sup>

What Camus put his finger on was not just political violence (or authoritarianism, deception, or ruthlessness broadly), but what we might term *ideological* and *moral* political ruthlessness. What bothered Camus was an outlook according to which acts of murder, deception and enslavement were held to represent a higher, truer morality, because they represented the necessary means for the achievement of morally imperative, far-reaching social transformation; once one recognized or committed oneself to attaining such a transformation, it was a moral necessity to “carry it through no matter at what cost: to fumble, to retreat, to be overcome by scruples, is to betray your chosen cause”.<sup>10</sup>

But what exactly is meant by characterizing an ethic, action, or pattern of behavior as *ideological*, *moral*, and *political*, and as an instance of *ruthlessness*? In identifying certain political actions and behavior as examples of “ideological ruthlessness”, I mean to bypass the Marxist theory of ideology and the controversies it has provoked. To call action “ideological” in the sense used here is, rather, to indicate that it is motivated and justified by a certain sort of adherence to a theory about how the world works, and how we should act in response. This *sort* of adherence is that which regards a particular theory as providing a master-key to understanding, which can unlock the answer to any practical question, once the circumstances out of which the question arises have been fit into the theory. This way of thinking fosters two kinds of blindness: blindness to normative considerations which cannot be subsumed within the master-theory, and blindness regarding aspects of the world that do not fit the theory – so that

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<sup>9</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage, 1956 [1951]), 3-4, 6; idem., “Neither Victims nor Executioners”, 30

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli”, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton University Press, 2001), 58.

evidence that seems to contradict the analysis and predictions derived from the central theory must be explained away.<sup>11</sup>

In specifying that the sort of political ruthlessness in question here is *moral*, I mean to underscore the fact that we are dealing with a mode of thinking according to which political ruthlessness is something *demanded* of individuals by a correct understanding of the dictates of morality.<sup>12</sup> This may involve *either* beliefs about morality, or ethics, as defined above: that is, it may take the form either of the belief that one's moral duties to others demand that one engage in acts of ruthlessness; or of the belief that personal qualities of ruthlessness, hardness, lack of compassion, hesitation, misgiving and regret are virtues to be cultivated and admired. Whether regarded as obligatory or excellent, ruthless behavior and a ruthless attitude are regarded as the right and proper way to act and think; ruthlessness is normative.

Finally, such actions and views are based on a conception of the nature and demands of *politics*: the justification is of specifically political ruthlessness: violence, deception, terror, etc. employed for the sake of political goals, and based on a conception of what ends and moral standards are appropriate to political conduct. On such views, the demands of politics both require ruthless action, and over-ride the claims of other spheres of life, values, or goals which might seem to push against ruthlessness (e. g. the claims of personal loyalty and affection, artistic or intellectual creativity, material comfort, etc.). It is primarily political ruthlessness that is justified by these views, insofar as ruthlessness is only regarded as morally necessary and

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *After the Fall: The Pursuit of Democracy in Central Europe* (Basic Books, 1993), 58-9. This sense of "ideological" is, of course, very different from that involved in the "theory of ideology" as developed by Marx (and others). Indeed, at least *some* deployments of the theory of ideology may, on the understanding of ideological used here, themselves be classified as ideological. On this point (and the Marxian theory of ideology generally) Michael Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* (Harvard University Press, 1996), particularly 258-72.

<sup>12</sup> See *The Rebel* 3.

laudable when it aims at or serves goals of political improvement or transformation; ruthlessness on behalf of purely personal desires or ideals, or ideals other than those of politics (scientific discovery, artistic creation, financial gain etc.) is not endorsed by the set of theories and outlooks discussed here.

Ruthlessness designates both particular *types* of action – actions that involve violating widely-held moral prohibitions, and go against common sentiments of compassion, reluctance, and squeamishness; and the *mode* of thinking that lies behind those actions – the way in which agents think about what they are doing, the attitudes that they develop in the course of deliberation and reveal in the course of action, and the sentiments of emotions they feel about their actions before, during, and after they act. Ruthlessness involves, first, an approach to deliberation in which various considerations and sentiments are dismissed, suppressed, or drastically subordinated to some consideration, principle, or goal which is taken as paramount. Second, it involves adopting a resolute, unhesitating attitude toward action – and a dismissal of misgivings during, and guilt after, the action. As a feature of feeling, ruthlessness involves a coldness, an insensitivity toward and lack of concern for others, an unfeeling readiness to harm them; and a particular way of regarding others – opponents, bystanders, and allies alike – as expendable instruments, or obstacles to be overcome.

Moral-ideological political ruthlessness thus refers to certain sorts of actions – acts of violence, terror, repression, deception, manipulation, humiliation, control, etc. – which are carried out in the service of political goals, and which are justified and demanded by adherents of that belief-system as being morally required, and laudable; and to the sentiments and dispositions of those who engage in these actions.

Two aspects of moral-ideological ruthlessness struck its opponents with particular force.

One was the way in which cruelty and self-righteousness were combined, and augmented one another. Writing a few years after Camus, Isaiah Berlin identified the same phenomenon when he wrote of the particular horror of those ideologues engaged in persecution and repression “peacefully and with a quiet conscience, with the feeling that they had done their duty, with the smell of roasting human flesh still in their nostrils, and slept – the sleep of the innocent after a day's work well done.”<sup>13</sup> Camus, too, was struck and horrified by the confidence, the lack of doubt, of those who embraced ideology, and with it ruthlessness: “We have seen men lie, degrade, kill, deport, torture - and each time it was not possible to persuade them not to do these things because they were sure of themselves ... We suffocate among people who think they are absolutely right”.<sup>14</sup>

Critics such as Berlin and Camus were also struck by the fact that many who embraced such ruthlessness did so out of genuine benevolence and idealism. As Camus wrote, “every one, with the exception of a few swindlers, believes that this particular truth is the one to make men happy. And yet the combination of all these good intentions has produced the present infernal world, where men are killed, threatened and deported”.<sup>15</sup> There were, of course, those who were simply malevolent, power-hungry, and full of irrational hate; such people could often, as in the case of Hitler and Stalin, shape the course of history. But part of the peculiar horror of twentieth-century atrocities was the way in which some of the most ruthless proponents of terror were genuine philanthropists, motivated by a passionate devotion to ideals of justice and liberation;

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<sup>13</sup> “Alexander Herzen”, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (Penguin, 2008) 229, paraphrasing Herzen. As this suggests, while the phenomenon of moral-ideological violence became particularly predominant in the twentieth century, it had appeared earlier; indeed, as many critics of these tendencies noted, they were comparable, in relevant respects, to the theologically-grounded arguments for the morality or virtuousness of political ruthlessness of earlier (and, it appears, later) periods.

<sup>14</sup> “Neither Victims Nor Executioners”, 28-9.

<sup>15</sup> “Neither Victims Nor Executioners”, 32

and how those fired by humanistic idealism were so often led to excuse, or join in, horrendous cruelty. As Milan Kundera later insisted, the “criminal regimes” of the Soviet Bloc “were made not by criminals but by enthusiasts convinced that they had discovered the only road to paradise. They defended that road so valiantly that they were forced to execute many people. Later it became clear that there was no paradise, that the enthusiasts were therefore murderers.”<sup>16</sup>

Some of these enthusiasts-turned-murderous-idealists came to recognize the perversion that had befallen them; a few left testimony of the process.

### **B. Kopelev's Ordeal: The Power of End-Maximalism and Ruthless Idealism**

Lev Zalmanovich Kopelev was a good man. He was also, for at least the first half of his life, a devout Communist. His faith in Marxism even survived the incarceration in the gulag that his moral decency provoked. Trained as a historian of German literature, Kopelev became a propaganda officer and interpreter in the Red Army during the Great Patriotic War against Germany, and accompanied his unit through the conquest of East Prussia. There Kopelev, born to a Jewish family in Ukraine in 1912, witnessed, and condemned, the Red Army's systematic campaign of rape and other war crimes against the vanquished German population. He was arrested for his “bourgeois humanism” and “compassion for the enemy”, and sentenced to ten years in the gulag. On his release – after Stalin's death, in 1954 – he re-joined the Communist Party and optimistically embraced Krushev's “thaw”; he broke with the Party for good, and becoming an active dissident, in 1968.

While Kopelev had from the beginning been too honest and searching to flourish in Stalin's empire (his first arrest came in 1929, at the age of seventeen), he had been a devoted servant of the Communist cause and the Soviet state throughout the 1930s – including during the

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<sup>16</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (Faber and Faber, 1985), 176

terrible famine that was inflicted on his native Ukraine in 1932-3.<sup>17</sup> After he had broken with Communism, Kopelev sought to reckon with his earlier beliefs, and make sense of his subsequent experiences, in several memoirs. He produced an account both of his actions, and the reasoning and sentiments behind them, which for vividness and insight has not, to my knowledge, been surpassed. Here is Kopelev on his experience as a 21-year-old Party activist in the Kharkov region (the location of Kopelev's home-town, and among the areas hardest-hit by the terror-famine) in 1932-3:

I heard the children ... choking, coughing with screams. And I saw the looks of the men: frightened, pleading, hateful, dully impassive, extinguished with despair or flaring up with half-mad, daring ferocity ... It was excruciating to see and hear all this. And even worse to take part in it ...<sup>18</sup>

With the others, I emptied out the old folks' storage chests, stopping my ears to the children's crying and the women's wails ... In the terrible spring of 1933 I saw people dying from hunger. I saw women and children with distended bellies, turning blue, still breathing but with vacant, lifeless eyes. And corpses – corpses in ragged sheepskin coats and cheap felt boots; corpses in peasant huts, in the melting snow of the old Vologda, under the bridges of Kharkov .... I saw all this and did not go out of my mind or commit suicide. Nor did I curse those who had sent me out to take away the peasants' grain in the winter, and in the spring to persuade the barely walking, skeleton-thin or sickly-swollen people to go into the fields in order to 'fulfill the Bolshevik sowing plan in shock-worker style.'<sup>19</sup>

How did a sensitive, compassionate, idealistic young man come to act this way?

Kopelev's actions reflected dedication to an ideal – and a particular sort of ethical reasoning about the implications of such dedication to action:

With the rest of my generation I firmly believed that the ends justified the means. Our great goal was the universal triumph of Communism, *and for the sake of that goal*

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<sup>17</sup> The death toll from the terror-famine has long been disputed; historians and demographers drawing on the currently-known data have estimated the fatalities to be around 3-3.5 million.

<sup>18</sup> Kopelev, *The Education of a True Believer* (1978), trans. Gary Kern (Harper & Row, 1980), 235

<sup>19</sup> Kopelev, *No Jail for Thought*, (1975) trans. Anthony Austin (Secker & Warburg, 1977), 12



*everything was permissible* – to lie, to steal, to destroy hundreds of thousands and even millions of people, all those who were hindering our work or could hinder it, everyone who stood in the way ... In the name of the noblest visions promising eternal happiness to their descendants, such men bring merciless ruin on their contemporaries. Bestowing paradise on the dead, they maim and destroy the living. They become unprincipled liars and unrelenting executioners, all the while seeing themselves as virtuous and honorable militants – convinced that if they are forced into villainy, it is for the sake of future good, and that if they have to lie, it is in the name of eternal truths.<sup>20</sup>

Achieving a moral goal – a goal which was compelling because it was so desperately needed in a world beset by injustice, misery, oppression and suffering, and because it represented such a height of harmony, happiness, and flourishing – demanded dedication and determination, and a temporary suspension of humane sentiment and principles: “I persuaded myself, explained to myself. I mustn't give in to debilitating pity. We were realizing historical necessity. We were performing our revolutionary duty.”<sup>21</sup> This led to a larger transformation of moral outlook, in which traditional moral standards were rejected as signs of moral weakness: “Good and evil, humanity and inhumanity – these seemed empty abstractions ... The concepts of conscience, honour, humaneness we dismissed as idealistic prejudices, 'intellectual' or 'bourgeois' and, hence, perverse”<sup>22</sup>

Looking back unsparingly, Kopelev attributed the sacrifice of his own humane values and sentiments – and of the dignity and lives of others – to a yearning for belief. When they saw “the base and cruel acts that were committed in the name of our exalted notion of the good, and when we ourselves took part in those actions, what we feared most was ... to fall into doubt or heresy

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 11-12 (emphasis added)

<sup>21</sup> *The Education of a True Believer*, 235

<sup>22</sup> *No Jail for Thought*, 13. Kopelev added: “I did not trouble myself with why 'humanity' should be abstract but 'historical necessity' and 'class consciousness' should be concrete.”

and forfeit our unbounded faith.”<sup>23</sup> There were also practical reasons to fear doubt, beyond the loss of emotional comfort. Kopelev and his countrymen had been taught to see themselves as engaged in a desperate struggle against a ruthless and insidious enemy – and against the accumulated weight of centuries of injustice, and the recalcitrance of the harsh natural world. Doubt would undermine the strength needed for victory in the struggle.

As Kopelev noted, a major element in the moral defense of ruthlessness was the belief that the end justifies the means – and indeed, that “[t]he means have *no moral weight* and do not enter into the moral scales.” (Or, as Sartre declared, “All methods are good when they are effective ... We shan't abolish lies by refusing to lie ourselves; we must use every weapon that comes to hand”<sup>24</sup>). Political efficacy – provided that political struggle was equated with the achievement of justified, or imperative, goals – came to be held paramount; notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, virtuousness and viciousness – along with the principles of freedom and democracy – were themselves regarded, not as principles and ideals binding on action, but as *means* to be used in the pursuit of success.

What was at work here was not merely consequentialism, but what Jonathan Glover has termed “ruthless consequentialism”,<sup>25</sup> resting on what we might term *end-maximalism*. End-maximalism involves a certain way of thinking about both means and ends. The end-maximalist approach consists of, first, an absolute, uncompromising commitment to achieving a particular end, which is regarded as compelling in part because of the very distance between that end, and

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 12-13

<sup>24</sup> Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 117 (see also *ibid.* 142); Sartre, *Dirty Hands*, quoted *ibid.*, 100. See also Trotsky, *Democracy vs. Dictatorship* (Workers Party of America, 1922 [1920],) 109-10.

<sup>25</sup> Glover, *Humanity*, 255, 259, 263, 275, 313. See also Stuart Hampshire, “Public and Private Morality” in *idem.*, *Public and Private Morality* (Cambridge University Press, 1978), 51.

the misery and injustice of present reality. Thus, Bolsheviks such as Lenin juxtaposed a vision of genuine freedom, democracy, fellow-feeling and community with a vivid perception of the “abomination” of contemporary capitalism and imperialism;<sup>26</sup> while in the 1930s Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, and their comrades “despised” the French Socialist party “because we were temperamentally opposed to the idea of reform; society, we felt, could change only as a result of a sudden cataclysmic upheaval on a global scale.”<sup>27</sup>

Second, end-maximalism involves an approach to evaluating courses of action in which the sole criterion is the prospective action's contribution to realizing the absolute, over-riding end; all other considerations – both of other consequences of the action, and of the action's intrinsic moral quality (if any such thing is even acknowledged to exist) – are regarded as irrelevant to deciding whether to engage in the prospective action or not, and as insignificant in judging the virtue or viciousness of the action. As Stephen Spender recalled of his and his comrade's views in the 1930s, in order to abolish “all the evils of the present and finally establish a free world”, “one did not have to consider, except from the point of view of their effectiveness, the means which were used nor the fate of individuals.”<sup>28</sup> There are no limits on what one may do in pursuit of a valid goal, save for considerations of what actions will best (most likely, most quickly, or most fully) realize that goal.

But the rationale for ruthless political practice generally arose, not from end-maximalism alone, but from its combination with a grim conception of politics as a process of struggle,

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<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, trans. Robert Service (Penguin, 1992), 3, 23, 73–4, 80; Trotsky, *Democracy vs. Dictatorship*, 63 (“To make the individual sacred we must destroy the social order which crucifies him, And this problem can only be solved by blood and iron.”)

<sup>27</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 30.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Spender, contribution to Richard Crossman, ed., *The God that Failed*, (Columbia University Press, 2001 [1949], 235; see also *ibid.* 238–42, 244, 253–5.

success in which requires harsh, drastic, and underhanded action. Such a conception of politics was, of course, not new. In the twentieth century, however, this “realist” recognition of the role of conflict and deception in politics was radicalized. With political goals conceived of in terms of morally imperative, sweeping and drastic social transformation, and with the contending sides in politics conceiving of themselves and their opponents as irreconcilable forces of good and evil (or progress and reaction, emancipation and oppression), politics came to be equated with (civil) war, in which there were not adversaries or opponents, but enemies – and in which even those who were not enemies could be strategically sacrificed.<sup>29</sup> This view seemed plausible because politics often did involve conflict between drastically opposed contestants – and often did turn into civil war.

The classic case for ideologically-driven ruthlessness was advanced by Lenin in the course of the Russian Revolutions of 1917: in order to effect change, one must seize power; in order to attain power, one must *win*, which means defeating one's opponents;<sup>30</sup> and in order to seize and retain power in conditions marked by the breakdown of traditional institutions and authority, one must remove one's opponents' ability to unseat one – one must crush opposition. There was “no point in wasting words where the use of power is required”; until “the final issue is decided, this awful state of war will continue. And we say '*a la guerre comme a la guerre*'”.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (e.g. “We are marching in a compact group along a precipitous and difficult path, firmly holding each other by the hand. We are surrounded on all sides by enemies, and we have to advance almost constantly under their fire.” (“What is to be Done?”, Robert C. Tucker, *The Lenin Anthology* [Norton, 1975], 15); *State and Revolution*, 19-20; Trotsky, “Their Morals and Ours”, *The New Internationalist* 4:6 (June 1938), 169.

<sup>30</sup> Lenin, *Works* Vol 25 (June-September 1917), 201; quoted Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (Norton, 2008), 759.

<sup>31</sup> Lenin, *Works* Vol 6 (January 1902–August 1903), 53; Vol 32 (December 1920–August 1921), 495; quoted Kolakowski 684, 762. See also the collection of Lenin's writings in *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, ed. Slavoj Zizek (Verso, 2002).

Circumstances of crisis, and drastic conflicts between implacably antagonistic opponents, created an *urgent* need for sacrifice, a peremptory demand for ruthlessness on behalf of the cause. As Trotsky – himself a brilliant military commander – insisted, in the struggle against reaction, “it was idle to talk about 'truth' and who was right – this was not an academic debate, but a fight to the death; the rights of the individual were irrelevant nonsense”; the “imminent requirements of history” could only be met through “violent revolution”, and not through the “debating society” of parliamentary democracy.<sup>32</sup> However, this model was extended beyond conditions of literal civil war, to encompass all political conflict.<sup>33</sup> Once such a view was taken, any political opposition came to be regarded as a potentially mortal threat, and the ruthless crushing of that opposition as a justified act of self-defense.<sup>34</sup>

Such conclusions reflect a deeper ethical argument, which challenges the *practical-ethical idealism* of many proponents of radical, morally-inspired reform. This view rested on a belief in the *ethical homogeneity of means and ends*. Morally just ends could be achieved through – or, in the view of many proponents of this position, could *only* be achieved through – morally just means; means, that is, that eschewed unjust acts (violence, deception,

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<sup>32</sup> Trotsky, *Democracy vs. Dictatorship*, 36, 63; see also idem., “Their Morals and Ours”, 169

<sup>33</sup> The best-known theoretical application of this move is that developed by Carl Schmitt. Schmitt himself presented his own conception of “the political” as providing a guard against moral-ideological ruthlessness: a properly political view of conflict – i.e. one utterly divorced from morality – would regard opponents as threats to be dealt with, but not as *morally* wicked; this would remove the motivation for ideological crusading – the attempt to eradicate evil from the world – which produced more ruthless, horrific violence and suffering than a sober acknowledgment of enmity between different groups. Just how ineffective (or erroneous) this deployment of political realism against moralistic ruthlessness was is suggested both by Schmitt's own embrace of one of the most brutal political movements of his time, and by the ease with which Schmitt's ideological allies and opponents alike interwove the language, and motivation, of ideological crusading with that of a coldly realistic project of self-defense in a mortal struggle against enemies.

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. the words of one Communist Party official tasked with motivating Ukrainian Party activists during the terror-famine: “It's war – it's them [the kulaks] or us! The last decayed remnant of capitalist farming must be wiped out at any cost!” Quoted Victor Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom* (New York: Scribner's, 1946), 91.

authoritarianism, inequalities of power, wealth, and status, etc.) An even stronger version of this view held that the use of morally just and virtuous means – if persisted with long, determinedly, and consistently enough – would eventually be sure to create more just social conditions and political institutions.

While the strongest versions of this view tended to be advanced by adherents of relatively small, marginal positions (pacifists, anarchists, religious communists), radical critics identified it as an assumption underlying much political thought and practice. Thus, Walter Benjamin would identify this conception of means and ends as the “common basic dogma” at the heart of both natural law theory, and legal positivism. The former, on Benjamin's view, sought to establish the legitimacy of means by appeal to the justice of the ends which they served; while the latter sought to ensure the justness of the ends, or results, achieved by legal institutions through appeal to the (procedural) justness of the means that produced them. Neither approach could admit that there might be an irreconcilable conflict between just means and just ends.<sup>35</sup> It was this “irreconcilable conflict” that proponents of a *realist* approach to political ethics perceived and stressed – though the ways in which they sought to cope with the conflicts, and moral conundrums, that this perception revealed differed markedly.

### **C. The Ethics of Ruthlessness: An Analytical Framework**

At this point, a detour into conceptual typology will be useful in fixing our sense of the phenomena being discussed here, allowing us to notice and make sense of different tendencies and the relationships between them. Many observers at the time identified the tendency to adopt an absolutist conception of the goals of political struggle, combined with ruthlessness in action, with “utopianism”. Yet many advocates of this tendency were explicitly, avowedly anti-utopian

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<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence”, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings 1913-1926*, Vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 1996), 236-8.

(Lenin and Trotsky never tired of denouncing utopianism and touting the anti-utopian nature of Marxism). Many critics of political extremism and ruthlessness also identified it with the Jacobinism of the French Revolution – and some proponents of these tendencies identified their politics with the Jacobin heritage. But this identification had the disadvantage of obscuring the affinities between those on the Left who identified with (some elements of) Jacobinism, and those on the Right who loathed it, as well as the indebtedness of many proponents of ruthlessness (across the political spectrum) to ideas developed in critique of Jacobinism.

As I use the term here (when not discussing another author's use of the term), *utopianism* involves the vision of a goal which constitutes a state of perfection – or, at least, a level of justice, freedom, happiness, and goodness which is drastically superior to present conditions, such that morally conscientious actors should feel compelled to pursue this goal. As such, we can note the element of (or at least affinity with) utopianism in morally-inspired ruthlessness described here. But utopianism as I understand the term *also* involves a particular tendency in thinking about means. The utopian is so fixed on the end that s/he does not give much consideration to the means at all. And to the extent that means are considered, the utopian tends to assume that the selection of means will not present much of an ethical problem, theoretically or practically: either the requisite ends will be achieved through perfectly moral means, or they will be achieved with minimal and wholly excusable (and residue-less) use of *prima facie* morally-dubious means. This tendency is observable in figures in whom it produced vastly different sorts of political conduct: thus, the utopian impulse and outlook led some to insist on ethical *purity* in the selection of means (because they assumed that good actions must produce good ends), and others to countenance ruthlessness (because momentary moral violations were considered relatively insignificant, and unproblematic in relation to the truly important matter of

the ends).<sup>36</sup>

*Jacobinism* involves the direct imposition of (abstract) moral principles through force. If Communism was, as Lenin is reported to have said, Soviet power plus electrification, then Jacobinism is moral absolutism plus violence. Such violence is carried out on behalf of, and in accordance with, moral ideals— so that only the guilty and wicked suffer (supposedly). Politics – including political violence – is thus identified wholly with a (moral) standard of justice and integrity. Terror is virtue, insofar as terror is carried out by the genuinely virtuous on virtue's behalf. Jacobinism in practice often involved an authoritarian model of politics, and an ethical ideal of morally pure, dedicated, selfless, highly disciplined political agents; but the crucial element, as I (stipulatively) use the term here, is the idea of bringing politics into alignment with morality rapidly and by means of force.

Utopianism and Jacobinism were both analyzed, and critiqued, in the wake of the French Revolution by Hegel and Marx – and again by Hegelian and Marxist philosophers during the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> The error at the heart of the crimes and failure of the Revolutionary Terror, on their view, was the revolutionaries' attempt to impose an abstract ideal onto reality – and their expectation that the ideal order would be realizable either through appeal to reason or moral sentiment, or through the application of massive force in a short period of time. Against this, Hegel and Marx called for *realism*. Such realism involved, first, reaching a correct understanding of the current state of society, and its origins; this understanding would enable political actors to discern both the ultimate outcome toward which historical progression was tending, and the next

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<sup>36</sup> This account of utopianism draws on the characterization of utopianism in George Klosko, *Jacobins and Utopians* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2003); 4. The following definition of Jacobinism, also bears some resemblance to Klosko's, though it lays emphasis in different places (see *ibid.*, 5, 175).

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. Georg Lukacs, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought* (1924), trans. Nicholas Jacobs (New Left Books, 1970); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror* (1947), trans. John O'Neil (Beacon 1969) 149.



step in getting there. While much of the ideological violence and terror of twentieth century politics was inspired and justified by utopian and/or Jacobin assumptions, many of the perpetrators and defenders of ruthless political action invoked the Hegelian and Marxian, “realist” critique of these tendencies – as, in some cases, did their critics.<sup>38</sup>

“Realism”, as I use the term here, has a number of connotations and implications. Realism as such begins from a description of the nature of political reality, and a conception of the relationship between politics and morality following from this description. On a “realist” view, conflict and violence are endemic to political life. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty, writing in the midst of the early Cold War, wrote, political action “is of its nature impure, because it is the action of one person upon another and because it is collective action ... There is no politician who can flatter himself upon his innocence.” On the strong version of realism propounded by Merleau-Ponty, history is a process of “struggle to the death”; “cunning, deceit and violence” are “inevitable”, because a society of individuals whose interests and beliefs irreconcilably conflict cannot be held together any other way. The principle of “unconditional respect for others” is simply impractical in the realm of politics, where one is faced with choices, not “between purity and violence but between different kinds of violence”; to seek “at every moment to treat every man as an end in himself” is, in effect, to do “nothing at all.”<sup>39</sup> Not all realists take such a stark view of politics; but all emphasize that politics is marked by conflict, disensus, and enmity, which make the elimination of struggle, and the use of coercion, manipulation, or threat to

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<sup>38</sup> These included anti-Communist Marxists (e.g. Mensheviks such as Julius Martov, or Merleau-Ponty in his post-Communist phase), as well as liberals who had been influenced by Hegel and Marx, such as Reinhold Niebuhr. On the whole, these critics minimized or rejected the (significant) dimension of historical teleology at work in Hegel's and Marx's “realism”; while their anti-liberal opponents (again, on the whole) emphasized it. I will return to this connection between views on political ethics and philosophy of history, throughout the discussion below.

<sup>39</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*,. xxxii-iii, xxxvii-viii, 68, 85, 96-7, 103, 107, 109; see also *ibid* 88.

(temporarily) resolve struggle, impossible.

From this conception of politics may follow a number of different, albeit related, prescriptive stances in political ethics. The first we may term *simple* (or *vulgar*) political realism. This is the view that holds moral or ethical considerations to be wholly subordinate to (or rendered irrelevant by) the logic and demands of politics. Politics is about securing power against opponents, and using it to achieve whatever goals one happens to have (though, if one is politically rational, one's use of power for any particular purpose will always be subordinated to one's overriding interest in getting and retaining power). *If* talk of morality in politics makes any sense of all, the morality attributed to an action must be a function of the action's *success*: “failure is a fault, and in politics one does not have the right to make errors”.<sup>40</sup>

The *dialectical-historicist* realism which grew out of Hegel's and Marx's critique of utopianism and Jacobinism goes beyond “vulgar” realism. It rejects the idea of moral and ethical goals and ideals which stand outside of the process of social development over time, and the conditions predominating in a given society at a given time. There *is*, on this view, a normative standard beyond the quest for power (and the verdict offered by immediate success). This standard is that of “history” – which means *both* the particular demands of the present moment, and the larger course of historical development. (Grasping the former, on this view, required understanding the latter.) This variant of realism points to a reconciliation of realism with political idealism, or the service of moral ends through political action: for it holds out the promise (or, at least, the hope) that violence may ultimately “be transcended in the violent creation of a new order”. At the same time, it holds that in many cases *only* ruthless measures will be effective in achieving such a moral end: “in order to free men in the future it was

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., xxxiv, 35, 42-3.

necessary to oppress men in the present.”<sup>41</sup> This is the official position of Marxism (and hence, Communism), and we will see its development and implications in our discussions of Lukacs and Koestler – though its influence was not limited to Marxists.

Third, we may distinguish an *evangelical* realism, which identifies the actions, perspective or approach, and dispositions of political realism with the requirements and normative standards of politics – and, indeed, with the highest or best way-of-being for human agents. On this view, cunning, hardness, cold calculation, and remorseless pursuit of victory are regarded not merely as being useful means to the end of achieving power or advancing the direction of history. Rather, they are constitutive of political excellence and a properly-functioning political culture..

Often, particular variants of political realism will combine elements of the three types outlined above. This is the case with one of the oldest and most familiar in the literature of political thought, a view which we might term *civic realism* (also referred to, historically and here, as “Machiavellism” and the ethics of “reason of state”). While this view asserts the need for unscrupulousness and occasional brutality in pursuit of political goals, it also reflects a strongly moral sense of public duty, which in turn rests on the belief that the good of the polity is of paramount importance, that public life is nobler and more significant than private life, that the enduring institutions and practices of a community are more important than individual moments or persons. As Machiavelli wrote, “when it is absolutely a question of the safety of one’s country, there must be no consideration of just or unjust, of merciful or cruel, of praiseworthy or disgraceful; instead, setting aside every scruple, one must follow to the utmost any plan that will

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., xviii, xix, 1, 7, 11, 35, 126-8, 129, 174.

save her life and keep her liberty.”<sup>42</sup> Like “vulgar” realism, civic realism draws a sharp distinction between political morality and non-political morality, and identifies the former with the simple pursuit of power (to the extent that Machiavelli himself is often read as a “vulgar” realist). And civic realists often sound like “evangelical” realists, extolling the virtue of those whose hard-headedness and capacity for effective brutality wins them glory as representing the height of human excellence. But civic realism is distinct in positing life in a flourishing political community as the highest good for human beings – and arguing for the superiority and necessity of a “realist” approach in politics purely as conducive to this higher end. Utopians and idealists are to be opposed not because they are deluded, but because their illusions lead the ship of state to founder on the rocks of corrupt human nature and chance – thus preventing the achievement of the highest good possible for human beings.<sup>43</sup> Civic realism or Machiavellism thus involves a justification of realism on behalf of a particular ethical ideal; and it understands “politics” not merely in formal terms (the pursuit of power, the attempt to resolve disputes through the deployment of power, or to eliminate obstacles to one's will), but in normative terms – as the promotion of a particular way of life, which involves certain obligations and ethical criteria.

The variants of “realism” sketched above, as well as the definitions of utopianism and Jacobinism, are “ideal types”, which do not neatly correspond to or perfectly describe actual individuals or movements. Thus Bolshevism, despite the “official” commitment to “dialectical-historicist realism” of its leaders, involved a combination of Jacobinism and different forms of “realism”; and some individuals (Lukacs, for example, whose case will be explored at some

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<sup>42</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, III:41, as quoted in Isaiah Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli”, 62. See also Hampshire, “Public and Private Morality”, 49-50, 52; and idem., *Innocence and Experience* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 175.

<sup>43</sup> Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli”, 39-42, 56-7. For a recent historical account and conceptual sketch of the tradition of reason of state see J. S. Maloy, *Democratic Statecraft: Political Realism and Popular Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

length in Chapter 2), displayed elements of utopianism and “dialectical realism” – and, at moments, “evangelical realism” as well.<sup>44</sup> As we shall see, one of the most remarkable and significant features of twentieth-century politics was the way in which idealism was so often combined with cynicism and brutality, by means of a mixture of utopian, Jacobin, and (multiple sorts of) “realist” outlooks.

This potent conjunction of realism and idealism was given eloquent voice by Bertolt Brecht in his teaching-play *Die Maßnahme* (translated as *The Measures Taken*). Brecht has his Communist agents explain their decision to murder a comrade who has exposed and endangered their covert mission thus:

For violence is the only means whereby this deadly  
World may be changed, as  
Every living being knows.  
And yet, we said  
We are not permitted not to kill. At one with the  
Inflexible will to change the world, we formulated  
The measures taken.

To which the “Control Chorus” replies

It was not easy to do what was right  
It was not you who sentenced him, but  
Reality.<sup>45</sup>

Brecht's play is an unsparing depiction of the “Inflexible will to change the world” – particularly when this will is joined to a “realistic” perception that what is needed to change the world is not gradualist reform or the immediate relieving of suffering, but a revolutionary conquest of *power*.<sup>46</sup> It is also an eloquent expression of the moral disgust with the cruelty and

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<sup>44</sup> The combination of utopianism and anti-utopianism may be traced back to Marx himself (as argued by Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* 36, 43).

<sup>45</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, trans. Stefan Brecht, 32-3.

<sup>46</sup> See *ibid.* 14, 23

injustice of the world as it is, that led idealists to embrace brutality and cynicism. The Young Comrade – who will become the victim of the murder at the play's center – is driven to join the Party by his idealistic instincts: “The sight of injustice compelled me to become a fighter. Man must help Man. I support the cause of freedom. I believe in humanity. I am for the measures taken by the Communist Party, fighting against exploitation and ignorance for a classless society.”<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, he ultimately accepts the need for his death, just as his comrades accept the need to kill him. Such idealistic ruthlessness is presented as a model for emulation – and a moral challenge to the audience:

With whom would the just man not sit  
To help justice?  
What medicine is too bitter  
For the man who's dying?  
What vileness would you not suffer to  
Annihilate vileness? ...  
Sink in filth  
Embrace the butcher, but  
Change the world: it needs it!<sup>48</sup>

We may shudder at such words, in light of the bloody record of Communism (particularly in China, where the play is set). But Brecht's case is a powerful one, which persuaded many who felt despair and disgust at the failures of the capitalist democracies between the world wars.

Some of those who recoiled from the savagery of ideological politics were inclined to blame the disasters of the century on the delusions of idealism – that is, the proud pretension to remake the world in the shape demanded by morality, and the innocent belief that such remaking was possible, and could be achieved without tragic cost and danger. This naïve idealism fostered,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 25

its critics alleged, irresponsibility, haste, intolerance and fanaticism, and hubristic blindness.<sup>49</sup>

Others were inclined to attribute the decline of politics into savagery to an excessive and debased “realism” – a mixture of contempt for ideals, infatuation with power, and moral fecklessness which allowed all principles and moral constraints to be sacrificed in the name of expediency. Both views are partly correct, and both are too simple. To fully understand the moral-psychological dynamic that marked the savage politics of the twentieth century, we must come to an understanding of the pitfalls not only of an embrace of ruthless political action in the pursuit of ideals, but of the intransigent adherence to ideals against the claims of political efficacy.

#### **D. Dirty Hands and Clean Consciences: Moral Purity vs. Political Responsibility**

*“He who seeks the salvation of the soul, of his own and of others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics”<sup>50</sup>*

*“... chasteness in the choice of means leads to political impotence”<sup>51</sup>*

Brecht's morality play represents one response to the moral choices facing those committed to radically re-making the world. Another response – the horrified recoil from revolutionary ruthlessness, to rediscover the absolute claims of moral constraints on the pursuit of moral goals – was articulated in an earlier parable-play by the socialist and pacifist poet Ernst Toller. Radicalized by service in World War I, Toller became “intoxicated” by the promise of the Bavarian Revolution of 1918. Through his eloquence and energy, he came to serve as President of the First Soviet Republic of Bavaria – for six days, before he was supplanted by the Communists, and the Soviet Republic was crushed by a coalition of Social Democrats and right-

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<sup>49</sup> See – in addition to the arguments adduced below – Maloy, *Democratic Statecraft*, 1-11

<sup>50</sup> Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation”, in H.H. Gerth, in Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds. *From Max Weber* (Oxford University Press, 1958), 126.

<sup>51</sup> Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (1941), trans. Daphne Hardy (Scribner, 2006) 160-61.

wing paramilitaries. Toller was captured and tried for treason; while most of his fellow leaders were summarily murdered, his case garnered sufficient sympathy from the court, the German intelligentsia, and the international literary community, that he was merely imprisoned (among those who testified on Toller's behalf was Max Weber).<sup>52</sup>

In prison Toller wrote the verse play *Masse Mensch* (*Masses/Man*, 1919). The title of the play indicates its central theme: the conflict individual conscience, and the cause of the “masses”, with its impersonal demands. The focal-point of this conflict is the ponderously named Sonja Irene L (“The Woman”), who represents the sort of morally-idealistic socialism to which Toller himself was dedicated. Sonja struggles for the soul of the revolution with “The Nameless”, who gives voice to the spirit of revolution itself. Through Sonja, the play poses the fundamental question facing Toller and other morally-inspired revolutionaries in the twentieth century: “How might one pursue political revolution, by Marx's definition violent, yet retain the human virtues on which the just, new order is to be based?”<sup>53</sup>:

The Woman: “No, you do not love people!

The Nameless: Our Cause comes first.

I love the people that shall be,

I love the future

The Woman: People come first.

You sacrifice to dogmas,

The people that are now.

The Nameless ... Who wavers, helps our masters –

The masters who oppress us and starve us –

Who wavers,

Is our foe

The Woman: If I took but one human life,

I should betray the Masses.

Who acts may only sacrifice himself.

Hear me: no man may kill for a cause.

Unholy every cause that needs to kill.

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<sup>52</sup> Mueller, *Contesting Democracy*, 45

<sup>53</sup> Albert Earle Gurganus, “Sarah Sonja Lerch, née Rabinowitz: The Sonja Irene L. of Toller's “Masse-Mensch”, *German Studies Review* 28:3 (October 2005), 607-620, at 607.



Whoever calls for blood of men  
Is Moloch.  
So God was Moloch,  
The State Moloch,  
And the Masses –  
Moloch”

Here we see two sorts of *moral absolutism* in politics: an absolutism of ultimate ends which leads to ruthlessness, and an absolutism of purity of means; or, to adapt a distinction from Auden, an absolutism of those who want to *do* good, and those who want to *be* good.<sup>54</sup> An absolutist commitment to decency and respect for human life as sacred appealed to many liberal opponents of political extremism and ruthlessness.<sup>55</sup> It is an attractive position. Yet it runs into difficulties. When the world is menaced by “The Nameless”, is it possible to conceive of a cause that does *not* need to kill – or at least, threaten death – in defense of the people of today? Before he was a revolutionary, Toller was a pacifist, and he here seems to be returning to his absolutist roots. But as Weber insisted, to withdraw entirely from political action – which does not always entail, but cannot wholly rule out, the threat and use of violence – in the face of the furious violence of others is to act irresponsibly, to allow evils to occur because one cannot bear to involve oneself in the guilt of being responsible for lesser evils.<sup>56</sup> If we care about more than our own moral cleanliness, surely we should prefer the lesser evil – provided that it really is *lesser*. In the turbulent politics of the twentieth century, it seemed, purity simply was not an option; and

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<sup>54</sup> Auden, “Men of Thought and Action” (1938), in idem., *Prose: And Travel Books in Prose and Verse, Volume I: 1926-1938*, ed Edward Mendelson (Faber and Faber, 1996), 460.

<sup>55</sup> The theme of opposition to the sacrifice of human beings to “Molochs” runs from such founders of liberalism as Benjamin Constant, to radical humanists such as Herzen, to anti-totalitarian radicals such as Orwell, Camus and Victor Serge, anti-totalitarian liberals such as Isaiah Berlin, and liberal-democratic oppositionists such as Adam Michnik.

<sup>56</sup> I discuss Weber’s critique of “purism” further in chapter 1, and the similar argument of Niebuhr in chapter 4.

to seek to preserve purity was to court impotence – and possibly destruction.<sup>57</sup>

Proponents of political ruthlessness had little patience for purism; their criticisms could be cogent as well as disdainful. Brecht was, as usual, particularly pungent in puncturing the vanity of “clean hands”: “If at last you could change the world, what/ Could make you too good to do so?/ Who are you?”<sup>58</sup> And Jean-Paul Sartre, in the play that gave the “dirty hands problem” its name, has his cynical Communist politician say (to the young Communist fanatic who is his would-be assassin – there is no real fear of anyone having clean hands here):

How attached to your purity you are, my boy! How frightened you are of soiling your hands. All right, stay pure! What does it help ... Purity is an ideal for a fakir or a monk ... you use it as an excuse for doing nothing. Do nothing, stay put ... wear kid gloves ... Do you think you can govern and keep your spirit white?<sup>59</sup>

Such arguments had purchase even on those inclined to join Toller in asserting plain decency against the demands of political “realism”. In a world menaced by “the Nameless”, politics was unavoidable – and *effective* engagement in political struggle was imperative. Moral integrity and purity seemed to demand a withdrawal from political action, or at least an entrusting of political outcomes to fate – an attitude reflected in such well-worn phrases as “the Christian does what is right, and trusts to God”, or “let justice be done, though the heavens may fall”. But it was not clear that subordinating considerations of efficacy to principle really did represent justice and right; it could be regarded as an abdication of one’s ability to act on behalf of justice – and thus, passive acquiescence to injustice. As Stuart Hampshire pointed out, “The

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<sup>57</sup> Toller’s play and his life both attest to the seriousness of the problem. In the play, “the Nameless” wins out, the revolution turns to brutal retribution, before it is repressed – and Sonja, refusing rescue by “the Nameless”, is executed by firing squad. Toller himself was forced to flee the Nazis – only to commit suicide in New York City in 1939; his death occasioned Auden’s “In Memory of Ernst Toller”, a lament for one who “was egoistical and brave”.

<sup>58</sup> *The Measures Taken*, 25.

<sup>59</sup> Sartre, *Dirty Hands*, quoted Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*, 100.

safety of the morally innocent, and their freedom to lead their own lives, depend upon the rulers' clear-headedness in the use of power." If political leaders are "too weak, too scrupulous, too inexperienced, or too pure", if they let their determination to effectively exercise power be overridden by commitment to standards of justice and honesty, they will render themselves "ineffective and impotent" – and the "innocent pursuits of the good" of their subjects and fellow-citizens will "sooner or later be disrupted". The morality of innocence, Hampshire warned, "is the morality of people who are resigned to being impotent"; to rise to the demands of political life imposes upon one "guilty knowledge", and instills the expectation of unavoidable squalor and imperfection, of necessary disappointments and mixed results, of half success and half failure. A person of experience has come to expect that his usual choice will be of the lesser of two or more evils."<sup>60</sup>

Those who wished to defend humanity, decency, and integrity as *political* values and goals were confronted by two ideals, both of which exerted a strong pull – and also posed dangers; borrowing terminology from Hampshire, we may label these the ethical modes of "innocence" and "experience". These are virtues of, respectively, "purity of character ... cleanness of intention", "absolute integrity, gentleness, disposition to sympathy, a fastidious sense of honour, generosity, a disposition to gratitude"; and a sense of responsibility and loyalty to institutions, "tenacity and resolution, courage in the face of risk, intelligence, largeness of design and purpose, exceptional energy, habits of leadership" – and the ability and willingness to

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<sup>60</sup> Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 164-5, 167, 170. Hampshire thus echoes Michael Walzer's account of "dirty hands" in politics (Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands", reprinted in Walzer, *Thinking Politically*, ed. David Miller [Yale University Press, 2007], 278-95.) See also, more recently, Mark Philp, *Political Conduct* (Harvard University Press, 2007); idem., "What is to be Done? Political Theory and Political Realism", *European Journal of Political Theory* 9:4 (October 2010), 466-84; Richard Bellamy, "Dirty Hands and Clean Gloves: Liberal Ideals and Real Politics", *ibid.*, 412-30.

use “hardness and deceit” when these prove necessary to secure the public good.<sup>61</sup>

Each of the modes that Hampshire discusses appeal, in their different ways, to an ethical – almost an aesthetic – aspiration toward purity or wholeness; each can be seen as linked to very different conceptions of a “pure” politics. The first seeks to purify political action of grubby compromise, vice and weakness. On this view, acting rightly in politics means faithfully upholding absolute moral ideals which are independent of and insensitive to political realities. Such an approach eschews ruthlessness – or seems to. In fact, it involves its own type of ruthlessness: an utter disregard for and intolerance of human frailty, an unwillingness to compromise on matters of moral principle, a willful subordination of actual human fate to absolute adherence to ideals.

The other position embraces a conception of “pure politics” in the sense that politics is purged of any consideration external to politics itself. Such a view resists the fanaticism of those who would seek to impose moral visions through political action – or to uphold moral principles through refusing to engage in (certain sorts of) political action. But it fosters ruthlessness by eradicating moral scruples that come into conflict with the purported goals of “politics”. This constitutes its own form of ethically-inspired ruthlessness. For politics itself is taken to have its own immanent norm, which demands pursuit, and justifies whatever means are necessary to attain it – overriding all other considerations. This end or standard may be sheer success, glory, or power – or the service of the polity or *patria*; or of something more intangible – a particular experience or mode of being which, it is claimed, can only be achieved in politics.

These two models or conceptions of “pure” politics are related to Hampshire's ethics of “innocence” and “experience”, but not identical to them. Rather, they involve taking each of

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<sup>61</sup> Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 12, 77, 186.

those ideals to an extreme, and asserting the resulting vision and mode of being as *the* one and only proper way to behave in the course of politics. As such, they tend inexorably toward ruthlessness. Both reflect the core error of “innocence” – a desire for a simple, pure mode of existence without compromise, loss, regret or sin (or, failing that, at least a pure, simple, clear-cut *standard* against which existence can be judged). And both deviate from the best aspects of the morality of innocence, in drifting away from humanity and gentleness, toward harshness and intolerance.

The competing claims of innocence and experience; the considerations of moral purity – or even personal decency – and social responsibility and political efficacy make demands on morally serious, politically conscious agents; the competing conceptions of “pure” politics – all pose challenges and dangers to those who would seek some balance and reconciliation between the demands of political efficacy and moral decency. These are, as Hampshire recognized, general tensions that afflict public life. But, as Camus noted, they presented themselves with particular force in the course of twentieth century history. They also, I now want to suggest, pose particular problems for proponents of liberalism, both within the particular ideological context of the twentieth century, and beyond.

## **Part II. Political Ethics, Anti-Liberalism, and the Liberal Predicament**

*“to hesitate or doubt ... was to give in to 'intellectual squeamishness' and 'stupid liberalism', the attributes of people who 'could not see the forest for the trees'”*<sup>62</sup>

*“In intellectual history this conflict is first of all only an example of the old struggle between might and right: the Machiavellian use of power is combated with a moral and legal ethos.”*<sup>63</sup>

### **A. Liberalism and the Politics of Limits**

No precise definition can capture the term liberalism's varied resonances.<sup>64</sup> For the purpose of this project, we may define liberalism, loosely, as a theory of government and politics emphasizing the importance of placing limits on the public, coercive power of human beings over others, for the purpose of safeguarding individual liberties.<sup>65</sup> Liberal politics is a limited politics – institutionally, normatively, ethically. Liberals embrace limits on concentration and arbitrariness of power – limits such as the rule of law; charters of guaranteed rights for individuals; accountable, representative political officials; a sphere of civil society endowed with both protections against the dictates of, and power to police, the state apparatus. Beyond this,

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<sup>62</sup> Kopelev, *No Jail for Thought*, 11.

<sup>63</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1924), trans. Ellen Kennedy (MIT Press, 1988), 37. Schmitt is here writing of the conflict between “Machiavellian” proponents of *raison d'etat/Staatraison* in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and their legalistic critics; but he connects this historical moment to a larger picture of liberalism.

<sup>64</sup> The following characterization of liberalism is an ideal-typical construct, which seeks to highlight common features of the political beliefs and (proposed) practices of a number of different individuals, movements, and tendencies of thought. In order to be inclusive, it represses certain crucial foundational arguments, which may divide those who nevertheless agree on the core convictions outlined here. It also emphasizes the protective, “minimalist” side of liberalism, concerned with protecting individuals against political evils, at the expense of visions of liberalism that center on ideals of human flourishing.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Charles Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 121-2. While tailored to my own concerns, my account of liberalism here is indebted to: Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy* (1988), trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper, (Verso, 2005); Stanley Hoffmann, “Principles of a Liberal Ethics for International Relations: A Normative Outline”, *World Disorders* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 250-52; Nancy L. Rosenblum, “Introduction”, idem., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 5-10; Alan Ryan, “Liberalism”, in Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit, eds. *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Blackwell, 1995), 293-8; Judith N. Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear”, reprinted in idem., *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, ed. Stanley Hoffmann (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3-20; Michael Walzer, “Liberalism and the Art of Separation”, reprinted in *Thinking Politically*, 53-67.

liberalism inculcates norms of recognizing such institutional limits as legitimate and desirable; and encourages internalizing this acceptance of limits in contemplating and undertaking political action, even in the silence of the law.

There is, of course, more to liberalism than an insistence that the coercive power of the state (and, for many liberals, other forms of coercive power as well) be confined to certain regular, enforceable limits. Liberals insist on limiting power as they do for the sake of securing individual liberty, and a social order marked by both the diversity and disagreement that follow from the practice of liberty, and the security and peace necessary for liberty's enjoyment.<sup>66</sup> This liberty, and its value, are conceived of in individualistic terms – the liberty of individuals (each and every one of whom is recognized as having equal claim to moral consideration and legal standing) to each pursue her or his (conception of) good in her or his own way, to the greatest extent compatible with similar freedom for others. Liberalism thus involves removing constraints on individuals' abilities to pursue their own lives in their own ways, by imposing constraints or limits on the ability of authorities to interfere with those pursuits.<sup>67</sup>

Another significant feature of liberalism, connected to both the conception of politics as (properly) limited, and the commitment to the protection of individual freedoms – and the respect for individuals which liberals believe the securing of such freedoms reflects, and is necessary to uphold – is a particular approach to politics. This is a reflexively “negative” and

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. Eric MacGilvray, *The Invention of Market Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 21-2. The liberal outlook, to again quote Camus, sees the task of politics as that of “arranging everyone's affairs so that each will have the leisure and the freedom to pursue” the common human search for meaning in life (*The Rebel*, 302).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Michael Walzer, *Radical Principles* (Basic Books, 1980), 97-8 (“liberalism is above all a doctrine of liberation. It sets liberals loose from religious and ethnic communities, from guilds, parishes, neighborhoods. It abolishes all sorts of controls and agencies of control ... It creates free men and women, tied together only by their contracts – and ruled, when contracts fail, by a distant and powerful state. It generates a radical individualism and then a radical competition among self-seeking individuals.”) This summary, while basically sound, understates the extent to which liberals have always emphasized internal, *ethical* constraints. The independent, self-seeking individuals of classical liberal theory were also (ethically) *disciplined* individuals.

“protective” approach, which conceives of liberty (and other crucial interests) as endangered and in need of protection; and political power as a danger to be guarded against. This is not to say that liberalism conceives of political power as *only* being a danger – nearly all liberals see at least some sorts of political power as tools for good – but that liberals recognize political power as always being potentially dangerous, an/or containing an element of danger. The “negativity” of liberalism, in this respect, will vary in extent and intensity, depending on individual temperament and historical circumstance; but it is always present to some degree.

This is not to say that liberalism is purely negative, either in inspiration or conclusion. It is founded on positive moral commitments: above all, to the value of liberty, and to what we might call (grandly and vaguely, but nevertheless evocatively) the ideal of humanity – the recognition of individuals' claims to being treated with the respect and consideration that, as human beings, they deserve. Liberty is necessary to living a decent, and fully human, life; and a decent and fully human life is the entitlement of every human being. How rich and elaborated, or minimal and stripped-down, the conception of a good human life, and of the good of liberty, presented by the liberals studied here varies; but all of them have such a vision, and their political thought flows from a commitment to it. But they are moved to political thinking by the need to protect humanity and freedom against forces that they perceive as threatening it – and, more specifically, forces that pose particularly dangerous threats to humanity and liberty because they (not implausibly) claim to serve those very goals.

This points to another element of liberalism: what might be termed its “moralism.” By this I mean the tendency of liberals to view politics as subject to extra-political moral norms, which should inform (though not necessarily wholly determine) the objectives of political action, as well as the limits placed on that action. Many liberal theorists explicitly base their political



theories on moral theories of justice or rights or the human good(s). Even the tendency of the most “minimalist” and “negative” of liberals to appeal to a “*summum malum*”, which it should be the duty of politics to protect against, can be seen as asserting a moral standard or duty that should guide and limit politics.<sup>68</sup>

This is not to say that liberalism necessarily involves a conception of politics as applied ethics (or applied moral philosophy).<sup>69</sup> I wish to suggest, rather, that liberalism is incompatible with the two conceptions of “pure” politics discussed above. On the one hand, liberalism involves commitment to protecting certain claims and goods that are conceived as having value outside of politics, and which are so valuable – or essential – that they place limits on the pursuit of “political” goals as understood by those who would purge all non-political considerations from political deliberation. On the other hand, liberalism's emphasis on the need to impose limits on the exercise of political power, even if the maintenance of these limits obstructs the pursuit of morally good ends, or the upholding of certain moral obligations, sets liberalism in tension with those who aspire to a seamless unity of politics and morality. The medium and tools of politics are power and force, and even where these are not violent, they exist in tension with “pure” morality. Furthermore, in politics success will usually depend on building coalitions and achieving some degree of consensus between those who disagree – and thus, will require compromise. The degree of insincerity, deception, self-interest, and reluctant acceptance of outcomes that fall short of what individuals most desire or think right that marks liberal politics *at its best* will make such politics intolerable to moral purists.

The limited, negative, moral, individualistic approach to political institutions and action

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<sup>68</sup> See Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear”, op.cit.

<sup>69</sup> See Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 1-11.

characteristic of liberalism is linked to a tendency toward *moderation*. This is not to say that liberals cannot be radical in crucial ways, pushing for immediate, rapid, far-reaching changes to existing society. But it does mean that liberalism rejects the extremes of “haste and compulsion” involved in “quasi-Bolshevik ways of realizing ideas”, insisting that change come about in ways that are compatible with maintaining limits and respecting the claims of individuals to protection against coercion and uprooting.<sup>70</sup> Liberalism, I want to suggest, insists on both purely institutional constraints, and also constraints on the actions individuals undertake and the stances they adopt within those institutional limits – and even on the goals they seek to achieve, which are circumscribed by respect for the liberty, the ability to pursue and realize their own modes of being, of others. Respect for rights, for individual liberty and social pluralism, rules out ruthlessness – or at least, forces a ruthless approach into a fairly tightly corralled space.

I have been characterizing liberalism, thus far, primarily in terms of theories or doctrines. But (as I explain further in Part III), I am also concerned with liberalism as feature of personal disposition, outlook, and character. Such a conception of an approach to liberalism is hardly new; Bertrand Russell, to take one example, wrote that the “essence” of the liberal outlook “lies not in *what* opinions are held, but in *how* they are held”.<sup>71</sup> Approaching liberalism in this way does not make the task of defining liberalism any easier – quite the contrary. But it does help to connect liberalism to the historical narrative and ethical problems presented above.

When people think about liberalism not as a doctrine, but as a quality of disposition or character, they often invoke, wryly or maliciously, Robert Frost's famous definition of a liberal as one too broadminded to take his own side in a quarrel. Liberalism is here identified with a

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<sup>70</sup> Jerzy Szacki, *Liberalism After Communism* (Central European University Press, 1995), 13.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted *ibid.*, 27.

feature of character and attendant outlook and approach – broadmindedness – and a consequent deficiency in action. The deficiency may seem fairly harmless, as political vices go – even endearing. But what happens when liberals find themselves in a “quarrel” with those who oppose liberalism root and branch? And particularly with those who oppose it in a way, and on behalf of a goal, that threaten the basic human values and interests that liberals hold dear – but which liberals cannot easily dismiss as simply vicious? Such was the case throughout much of the twentieth century, when liberals found themselves engaged in a struggle in which they were “in principle at a disadvantage, since they are *unable to exhaust all possible means* ... it is equally essential to them to legitimize their adversaries and to confront them.”<sup>72</sup> This is the heart of what I will term the “liberal predicament”, which I explicate further below. First, however, it is necessary to understand the nature of the challenge that faced liberalism – the politics, ethics, and ideology of “anti-liberalism” – and its relationship to the previous discussion of ethically-inspired political ruthlessness.

### **B. The Ethical Critique of Liberalism**

By the time it was three decades old, the twentieth century had seen the crisis, partial triumph, and renewed crisis of liberalism. Liberal hopes, ascendant in many quarters (though already under attack in others) at the beginning of the century, had been deeply shaken by the senseless slaughter of World War I; the seeming rise of a sort of liberalism – marked by a combination of national self-determination and international cooperation – out of the ashes of pre-1914 Europe following the War quickly descended into a crisis of faith in both liberalism and democracy in the 1930s. These developments reflected a combination of events and ideas which motivated and lent plausibility to a far-reaching, often bitter critique of liberalism.

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<sup>72</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955), trans Joseph Bien (Northwestern University Press, 1973), 9, emphasis added.

Much of the crisis of liberalism arose from a questioning of the assumptions about historical progress, human rationality, individual interests and social dynamics on which liberalism was perceived to rest. Liberalism was identified by many with the “incomparable” – and now, it appeared, unsustainable – “optimism” of pre-war Europe. This optimism consisted in the belief that increased interdependence, the secure shielding of individuals from the coercive arm of the state (through enlightened legislation and an independent, professional legal and administrative system), and the naturally congruent play of individual and collective self-interest (guided by education and by rational legislative elites) would produce stable, peaceful domestic and international orders.<sup>73</sup> The confidence in human rationality, mutual respectfulness, and benevolent solidarity, and belief in meliorative historical progress, had been under stress and threat for some time – indeed, since the advent of Romanticism, to say nothing of the still more fervid and alarming atmosphere of the *fin de siècle*. But they were decisively shattered by the War – which R. G. Collingwood judged “an unprecedented disgrace to the human intellect”<sup>74</sup> – and by the collapse of the economy and of parliamentary democracy in the decade following the Armistice. The “idea of progress”, central to the faith of earlier generations of liberals, had, by

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<sup>73</sup> Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, 10-11; see also Glover, *Humanity*, 1, 6-7; Hampshire, “Morality and Pessimism”, 3-4, 16; idem. *Innocence and Experience*, 7-8. For a testament to the faith in progress of early-twentieth century liberals we can do no better than John Maynard Keynes's account: “We were among the last of the Utopians, or meliorists as they are sometimes called, who believe in a continuing moral progress by virtue of which the human race already consists of reliable, rational, decent people, influenced by truth and objective standards, who can be safely released from the outward restraints of convention and traditional standards and inflexible rules of conduct, and left, from now onwards, to their own sensible devices, pure motives and reliable intuitions of the good ... We were not aware that civilisation was a thin and precarious crust erected by the personality and the will of a very few, and only maintained by rules and conventions skilfully put across and guilefully preserved” (Keynes, “My Early Beliefs”, *Essays in Biography* (MacMillan, 1972), 447. For an attack on liberalism as representing an optimistic philosophical anthropology, see Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. and ed. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 60-66.

<sup>74</sup> Collingwood, *An Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. David Boucher and Teresa Smith (Oxford University Press, 2013), 90.

the 1930s, “lost its glamour”;<sup>75</sup> after World War II Judith Shklar observed that “no reasonable person can today believe in any 'law' of progress. In the age of two world wars, totalitarian dictatorship, and mass murder this faith can be regarded only as simple-minded, or even worse, as a contemptible form of complacency.”<sup>76</sup>

For some, the undermining of faith in progress and in human reason opened up a larger crisis of belief in the intelligibility or meaningfulness of history, and the validity of human values. European thinkers were oppressed by a sense of the growing inescapability not merely of pessimism, but of nihilism. Liberalism came to appear hopelessly hopeful, blindly optimistic in its basic premises, and incapable of inspiring effective political action in the modern world. Others were less oppressed by a sense of moral or existential crisis; they perceived, instead, a *social* crisis, which was both caused by and demonstrated the failure of liberalism to base itself in an adequate social theory. Thus, Auden alleged that “[l]iberal Democracy has failed, and failed completely” because its a-historical, a-contextual, abstract individualism underestimated the power of social relations and inequalities of power; because it stressed freedom and ignored justice, thus producing “social inequality, class war, lack of social conscience, lack of social cohesion, lack of sociality”.<sup>77</sup>

But the crisis of liberalism was also *ethical*: it revolved around charges that liberalism rested on false, confused, dangerous and dishonest ways of thinking about the ethics of political action; and that liberalism's own principles and practices failed to live up either to its own avowed principles, or the demands of a rational, realistic political morality.

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<sup>75</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time* (Routledge, 1943), 121–2; cf. Richard Overly, *The Twilight Years The Paradox of Britain Between the Wars* (Penguin Books, 2009).

<sup>76</sup> Shklar, *After Utopia* (Princeton University Press, 1957), vii; cf. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center* (Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 38–41.

<sup>77</sup> Auden, “Democracy's Reply to the Challenge of Dictators” (1939), *Prose Volume I* 464.

We may distinguish four closely interconnected, but distinct, lines of ethical critique leveled against liberalism. The first, most often advanced from the Left, identified liberalism as an *ideological* rationalization of the misery and injustice of modern economic life, and the crimes of Western imperialism. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote, the avowed “purity of [liberal] principles not only tolerates but even requires violence.” The “formal and 'universal' rules of sincerity and objectivity” touted by liberals were in fact “the rules of the capitalist game”; such rules hindered efforts to fight the oppressive hold of the powers-that-be – but did not inhibit those powers from using violence to crush those who challenged them. And the “ostentatious cult of values, of moral purity, of the inward man”, to which liberalism subscribed, was “secretly akin to violence, hate, and fanaticism”: for the “aggressive [anti-communist] liberalism” of the post-war period was in reality an “ideology of war”, utterly devoid of the moral superiority it pretended to over Communism; indeed, it resembled “the brutality, hybris, vertigo, and anguish that clearly found expression in fascism.”<sup>78</sup> From this perspective, liberals’ objections to the ruthlessness – the violence, deception, authoritarianism, and ethical double-standards – of their opponents appeared *hypocritical*; their protestations against the inhumanity of revolutionary measures disguised a deeper inhumanity at liberalism's heart. Liberal notions of freedom, democracy, and justice were shams; so were the institutional and ethical limits they professed – and sought to impose on opponents.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, xiii, xxi, xxiv, 127, 168; see also *ibid.*, 174-7.

<sup>79</sup> Trotsky hammered this point home with characteristic relish: “The morals of these gentlemen consists [*sic*] of conventional precepts and turns of speech which are supposed to screen their interests, appetites and fears. In the majority they are ready for any baseness – rejection of convictions, perfidy, betrayal – in the name of ambition or cupidity ... the end to them justifies any means. But it is precisely because of this that they require special codes of morals, durable, and at the same time elastic, like good suspenders.” (“Their Morals and Ours”, 171-2) See also *idem.*, *Dictatorship vs. Democracy*, 58-9; Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, particularly at 81, 104; Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 77-8; and Walter Benjamin’s attack on those who sought to repress “excesses” of violence so as to retain their own monopoly on violence (Benjamin, “Critique of Violence”, *op.cit.*, 238-9).

A second line of critique was that of *innocence*. Liberalism, according to this line of attack, evades the reality of politics, rendering itself impotent in the service of its own professed ideals. Because liberals cannot reckon with the need to use force and fraud in the pursuit and exercise of power, they cannot act coherently or effectively in political struggle. Liberals fail to realize that a properly *moral* politics is one which departs from the standards of morality in order to realize moral ends; recognition of this need to pursue an ultimate good through seemingly dubious means is the wisdom of radicalism. Thus, in his comparison of liberalism and (non-Stalinist) Communism, Sartre noted that liberals aimed at the same humanist objectives as the left-wing radical. But they lacked an appreciation of the “dialectical” nature of change – the fact that humanistic ideals could only be realized through ruthless struggle which seemed to defy humanistic principles. Liberalism was “utopian”: it assumed that a humane society could be achieved “*at once* through simple interior disposition” – through simple good will and decent personal conduct.<sup>80</sup> Sartre's colleague Merleau-Ponty agreed on this point: liberalism enjoyed a “wonderfully clear conscience”, inhabiting the false dream of a “happy universe” of ethical certainty.<sup>81</sup>

Such a failure to grapple with the reality of politics might be a matter of mere innocence were it not for the fact that liberalism is a political doctrine– so that the liberal doesn't have the excuse of the purist or “saint” who simply renounces politics. Thus, the charge of innocence was closely related to that of *irresponsibility*. Liberalism's fault lay in a failure, not of perception or understanding, but of nerve or resolve – its tendency to recoil from the horrors and harsh demands of politics, to hide behind (as Trotsky famously and ferociously wrote) “Kantian-priestly

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<sup>80</sup> Sartre, *Cahiers pour la morale* (Gallimard, 1947-8), quoted Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*, 125-6.

<sup>81</sup> *Humanism and Terror*, xxxvii, 175.

and vegetarian-Quaker prattle”.<sup>82</sup> Liberals failed to live up to the demands of politics because of their moral squeamishness, sentimentality, and self-indulgence. Such liberal fastidiousness was positively harmful – and thus, morally blameworthy – insofar as a pragmatic, resolute “economy of violence” was likely to produce a quicker, and thus ultimately less bloody, resolution to class conflict than would a more hesitant, scruple-laden approach.

Finally, and drawing on all of the other accusations, there was the charge – one felt most keenly, at times, by liberals themselves – of *impotence* in the face of injustice and agony. It was this feeling of impotence that impelled many who would otherwise themselves have been liberals into rival camps. This line of critique – or, this impulse of self-disgust – remains familiar to us; it was expressed well by Auden and Isherwood, surveying the horrors of the Japanese conquest of China in 1938: “And the well-meaning tourist, the liberal and humanitarian intellectual, can only wring his hands over all this and exclaim: ‘Oh dear, things are so awful here – so complicated One doesn’t know where to start.’”<sup>83</sup>

Such critiques fueled the politics of what I here call *anti-liberalism*. I use this label to underline the similarities between a number of political theories, stances, and movements which resemble one another in their rejection of liberalism. To be “anti-liberal” means more than to have reservations about, or even deep objections to, liberal theory, or to be committed to values which conflict with central commitments of liberal theory or common features of liberal practice. Rather, the anti-liberal is one who believes that the liberal understanding of politics, morality, and the relationship between them is fundamentally mistaken: so mistaken as to be doomed to

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<sup>82</sup> *Dictatorship vs. Democracy*, 59, 63.

<sup>83</sup> W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey To A War* (1938), in Auden, *Prose Volume I*, 634. Auden and Isherwood’s own ambivalence is expressed in their dedication of the work to that arch-liberal, E.M. Forster – and their acknowledgement that, as they “run down the slope of Hate with gladness”, and “are excited/ To join the jolly ranks of the benighted/Where Reason is denied and Love ignored”, Forster “trip[s] us up”, and “promise[s] still the inner life shall pay.” (ibid., 494).



failure – or to demand resistance and overthrow.

Many of the main features of anti-liberalism are depicted in Thomas Mann's portrait of the Jewish-born Jesuit-Bolshevik Naphta in *The Magic Mountain*. Naphta affirms that “the zeal of the godly cannot, by definition, be pacifistic”; and extols “absolute authority and an ironclad bond – discipline and sacrifice, renunciation of the ego and coercion of the personality.” The Proletariat, which has inherited the Christian mission of redeeming the world, must embrace means that are ““terroristic – that is, anti-liberal.” This meant not only violence, but an iron discipline and subordination of the individual to the sect (or Party), which “relieve[s] the individual of the burden of conscience, and in the name of an absolute goal, consecrates every means, even to bloodshed, even to crime.”<sup>84</sup>

While “anti-liberalism” is a broad category, embracing a number of distinct, often mutually antagonistic political tendencies, Mann's portrait captures much of what is central and common to anti-liberalism's various strains. Just as “liberalism” is characterized by a belief that there are morally significant reasons to place limits on political power and on what men and women do to one another with and for it, the anti-liberalisms with which I am concerned are united in holding that there are morally relevant and compelling reasons why political power and political action must go beyond liberal limits – why, in fact, morality demands the use of political force in an uncompromising and unfettered pursuit of the appropriate ends. Anti-liberalism, then, is closely connected to the impulse of morally-inspired ruthlessness discussed above. It differs from such ruthlessness, conceptually, in taking liberalism in particular as the target against which it, to a considerable degree, defines itself, and in rejecting the particular institutional and ethical

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<sup>84</sup> *The Magic Mountain*, trans. John E. Woods (Vintage, 1996), 474, 476, 478, 602-3 (translation modified).

restraints insisted upon by liberalism.<sup>85</sup>

This rejection of liberal constraints and scruples in the pursuit and use of political power is a common feature of anti-liberalism. But my focus is on those varieties of anti-liberalism that confront liberalism on the ground of political ethics – and on a subset of these that particularly get under liberals' skins. These are those forms of anti-liberalism that are resolute in their rejection, and cutting in their critique, of liberalism, while appealing to values and principles the force of which liberals themselves must recognize. Such variants of anti-liberalism charge liberals with complacency and blindness about the realities of the world – and with a lack of seriousness or sincerity in their commitment to their own stated goals.

We may distinguish, first, between *realist* and *moralistic* variants (in terms both of motivation, and rationale) of anti-liberalism. *Realist* anti-liberals reject liberalism as ineffectual and naïve – and thus as failing to meet the standard of responsibility demanded by politics. *Moralistic* anti-liberals attack liberalism for failing to follow through with its own (stated) commitment to principles of liberty, equality, and justice.

“Realistic” anti-liberalism has often formed a part, but “moralistic” anti-liberalism has almost always been a central feature, in specifically *left-wing* anti-liberalism. “Left” anti-liberalism is marked by, first, a commitment to characteristically left-wing values. The “great ideal of the Left” is “well-being for all”;<sup>86</sup> this well-being is associated with material sufficiency,

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<sup>85</sup> Some anti-liberals, while rejecting the particular limits on political power and human action affirmed by liberalism, opposed the ethically untrammelled (or simply unscrupulous) action advocated by their comrades. Rosa Luxemburg's critique of Lenin provides one notable example (Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution: and Leninism as Marxism* [University of Michigan Press, 1961]). In Luxemburg's case, these differences took the form of significantly different political theories and practices; such differences could also take the form of relatively greater humanity and restraint within the same basic political framework – as we can see by comparing more civilized Bolsheviks, such as Bukharin, Lunacharsky, or Bogdanov to Stalin and his minions (see e.g. Glover, *Humanity*, 261-4).

<sup>86</sup> Ted Honderich, *Violence for Equality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 180.

with full standing and efficacy as self-governing citizens, with emancipation from social subordination and deprivation, and from enslaving ideas. The concern with the well-being *of all* reflects the centrality to left-wing politics of the value of equality; and well-being for all is often presented as morally obligatory, a matter of *justice*.<sup>87</sup> These are all, it should be stressed, commitments of liberalism as well. If left anti-liberals and liberals don't entirely agree on the basic principles and values of an ideal society, their professed ideals share much in common.<sup>88</sup> The core postulates of "left" anti-liberalism are, first, that liberalism does not and cannot deliver on its own (morally egalitarian) commitments to justice and well-being; and, second, that in failing to uphold its commitment to justice, liberalism also betrays its commitment to liberty. Such "left" anti-liberalism has proven more troubling for liberals than have right-wing critiques of liberalism, which usually involve a departure from and rejection of basic liberal aspirations and principles. Left-anti-liberal critiques have accordingly been particularly instrumental in pointing liberals toward the complexity of political ethics and the nuances of ethos.<sup>89</sup>

This is not to say that "left" anti-liberalism has been the only challenge which has shaped the liberalism discussed here. Certain variants of "realist" anti-liberalism (which has become part of the arsenal of critics of liberalism from both left and right) have been particularly troubling to liberals, in calling into question their avowed commitment to realism and *responsibility* (if

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<sup>87</sup> This produces a paradoxical feature of much left-wing thought, arising from the fact that commitment to achieving equality often means, in practice, a rejection of concern for the well-being of some – those who are obstacles to achieving equality. If one is a social egalitarian, one cannot countenance kulaks; but if one is a moral egalitarian, one must recognize kulaks as having the same claims to concern as peasants or proletarians.

<sup>88</sup> The point was (over-)stated by Sartre, who observed that Trotsky's "ultimate end" – that of "social antagonisms suppressed, man becomes an end for man, lying and violence are banished" – was "a Kantian ideal: it is the Kingdom of Ends" (Sartre, op. cit., quoted Lukes 125).

<sup>89</sup> Here – as elsewhere – my historical and normative concerns overlap: it is both historically the case, I believe, that many (not all) liberals have been more troubled by ethical critiques of liberalism advanced from the "left"; and it seems to me that such critiques *should* be more troubling to liberalism's conscience, insofar as they call into question the moral coherence of liberalism.

liberals can object that left-wing alternatives to liberalism are “unrealistic” or ‘irresponsible’, are they not vulnerable to the same charges themselves from those who doubt that liberal scruples are compatible with the maintenance of public order?). This “realist” critique of liberalism, indeed, was articulated not only by many anti-liberals on the left (as well as anti-liberals on the political right, such as Schmitt), but by many liberals or quasi-liberals themselves (as we shall see in the cases of Weber and Niebuhr).

My focus is thus mainly fixed on “left-wing” variants of anti-liberalism, with its mix of “realist” and “moralist” elements: for “left” variants of anti-liberalism are the ones which have tended to pose the sharpest conceptual, and emotional, challenges to liberals' approach to political ethics. I will, correspondingly, largely ignore or bracket the challenges to liberalism from those ideologies of the Right (Fascism, Nazism, Falangism, and so on), which reject liberalism out of devotion to ends which liberals find intrinsically repulsive.

This raises the hoary question of the moral difference – if any – between Communism and Nazism/Fascism. Both affirmed an ethos of hardness, dedication (even fanaticism), discipline, ruthlessness.<sup>90</sup> Yet the *ethical* challenges they posed for liberalism were significantly different. Anti-liberals on the left were dedicated to visions of the liberation of the oppressed and downtrodden. The “liberation” for which Nazism and Fascism strove consisted in unleashing the fury and power of the *natural* rulers, who had momentarily been subjugated through the treason of the weak. Domination was regarded as an end in itself – indeed, the ultimate end.<sup>91</sup> Nazism was a philosophy of bullies. Communism, initially, was not: it was a philosophy of outraged

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<sup>90</sup> This commonality of *ethos* – and to some degree, ethical ideal (that is, the ideal of personal character as expressed in conduct) – was one reason for the tendency of some individuals, who were particularly repelled by the ethos of liberalism and attracted to an ethos of “heroic” radicalism and ruthlessness, to embrace right-wing and left-wing movements in turn; Georges Sorel is perhaps the most notable example of this phenomenon.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 69-70, 74-5.

conscience, of indignation at cruelty and a wish to end it, rather than a celebration of cruelty and domination *as such*. Communism, admittedly, came to glorify cruelty against those deserving of it – the enemies of the rising and oppressed proletariat, those on the wrong side of “History”. But the objects were deserving of cruelty because they were themselves cruel; the objects of appropriate and obligatory cruelty in the Nazi imagination were worthy of cruelty because they were *weak*.

Left-wing anti-liberalism poses a more pressing and interesting ethical problem for liberals than does right-wing anti-liberalism, because its critiques express liberalism's own uneasy conscience, and constitute competition for liberals' claim to be the party of humanity, justice, freedom, and enlightenment.<sup>92</sup> Many liberals shared Isaiah Berlin's perception of Communism as “the treacherous heir” of earlier liberalism; they did not see Fascism in the same light. They might recoil from the programs and actions of left-wing anti-liberals; but they could not easily dismiss the ethical critiques leveled against them. As Berlin wrote, the “natural inclination” of liberals was “towards the left, the party of generosity and humanity, towards anything that destroys barriers between men”; if liberals were particularly outraged by the ruthlessness of revolutionary proponents of egalitarian and emancipatory goals, it was partly because they believed that “such methods will distort or destroy the common goal.”<sup>93</sup> Liberals were thus put on the defensive: they had to vindicate their principles – and put their own house in order, both theoretically and practically.

### **C. The “Liberal Predicament”: Anti-Liberalism as a Moral Dilemma**

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<sup>92</sup> This dynamic was mutual. In many situations (most notably, Russia in 1917), liberals appeared to proponents of revolution not as representatives of a repressive or unjust order which the revolutionaries sought to combat, but as *rivals* for the mantle of democratic reform and modernization.

<sup>93</sup> Berlin, “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century”, *Liberty*, 60; idem., “Fathers and Children: Turgenev and the Liberal Predicament”, *Russian Thinkers* 343

The conjunction of anti-liberal critiques of liberalism with anti-liberals' violation of liberal norms in practice gave rise to the "liberal predicament". This predicament was a complicated one; we may identify two primary, general components. One was how to justify the compromises and constraints embraced by liberalism, which seemed to impose hobbling, perhaps insurmountable, burdens on both the pursuit of higher goods, and responses to political necessity. The second was the challenge of how to combat anti-liberal movements in ways that neither sacrificed political efficacy to rigid adherence to principle, nor betrayed commitment to basic liberal principles in the name of defending them. Responding adequately to both components of the "liberal predicament" meant avoiding two dangers: that of adhering too rigidly or complacently to liberal ideals and principles; and that of succumbing to anti-liberal tendencies.

Faced with critiques of liberal innocence, hypocrisy, and irresponsibility, many liberals found it difficult to resist a temptation to capitulation. Not only did left-wing anti-liberals prick the sensitive consciences of liberals; they also offered a picture of a strength, confidence, conviction, consistency, and efficiency which liberals often envied. Liberals both felt that they *ought* to be more resolute and effective in relieving suffering and deprivation, and combating injustice and the forces of authoritarian reaction; and *wanted* to feel a sense of efficacy and confidence in doing so. Their inward sense of doubt and demoralization made it harder to answer the anti-liberal question: why should liberal restraints be observed, when the world was in crisis, and so many problems cried out for solution?<sup>94</sup> Liberals also felt themselves at a disadvantage,

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<sup>94</sup> I discuss this problem, as it was experienced and addressed by Niebuhr and Berlin, below. For testaments to it, see Stephen Spender, *Forward from Liberalism* (Gollancz, 1937); and Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 36-151; and, from an ex-anti-liberal perspective, Richard Crossman, ed., *The God that Failed* and Francois Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Deborah Furet (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

due to their increasingly jaundiced view of democracy. Many came to be bitterly aware of the people's tendency to admire and follow the strong, resolute, and ruthless, and not the hesitant, moderate, and scrupulous.<sup>95</sup>

In such circumstances, many liberals were drawn toward – and sometimes into – Communism. Others looked for alternative ways to combine more-or-less liberal ends with anti-liberal means. H. G. Wells insisted that liberals had to “move with the times” and transform themselves into “a Liberal Fascisti”, which would abandon the “sentimental casualness of nineteenth-century Liberalism”.<sup>96</sup> Such arguments seemed persuasive even to those who remained closer to nineteenth-century liberalism – and they have continued to seem compelling well after the inter-war crisis of democracy had passed.

If many liberals were tempted to join or emulate anti-liberals in order to combat injustices, many other (and some of the same) liberals were tempted to emulate their opponents' ruthlessness and rigidity in fighting on behalf of liberalism itself. Trotsky's defense of his own movement's embrace of ruthlessness – “Whoever fawns before precepts established by the enemy will never vanquish that enemy!”<sup>97</sup> – can be turned around: if liberals were bound by their *own* precepts, they could not hope to vanquish enemies who were not. Remaining bound by liberal principles seemed foolish when confronted by enemies who embraced “the formula of the Jacobins: if you are in power, I demand for myself civil rights because those are your principles;

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<sup>95</sup> Cf. Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 162-3.

<sup>96</sup> Wells quoted in Philip Coupland, “H. G. Wells's 'Liberal Fascism'”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35:4 (October, 2000), 541-558, at 543.

<sup>97</sup> “Their Morals and Ours”, 171.

if I am in power, I take away those rights from you because those are my principles.”<sup>98</sup> The defense of liberalism seemed, in practice, to demand a compromise or abandonment of liberal norms, and a disavowal of liberalism's tolerant, compromising spirit.

This point was pressed home by Trotsky's erstwhile acolyte, James Burnham, in his book *Suicide of the West* (1964). Here Burnham – whose *The Managerial Revolution* (1941) and *The Machiavellians* (1943) were leading articulations of a “Machiavellian” or “realist” argument for the rejection of idealistic illusions, and made Burnham the *bete noir* of George Orwell – laid out the case that liberalism was the “ideology of Western suicide”. Liberalism's problem, Burnham explained, was that enemies of liberalism within liberal societies used the freedoms guaranteed by liberal principles as so many “levers” to use in their own pursuit of power; and that, furthermore, liberals were hamstrung by a sense of guilt about imitating the “methods of the enemy” – and so were “demoralized in advance” in any confrontation with their enemies. Liberalism's “grave weakness” was that, faced with ruthless opponents, it could “survive in application only by violating its own principles”. This made it fundamentally unsuited for power. (For the conservative, fiercely anti-Communist Burnham, on the other hand, the liberal dilemma was purely ideological: “common sense” clearly indicated that those who did not agree with the “rules of the game” could not claim protection from those rules.)<sup>99</sup>

The epitome of the sort of fastidious liberalism Burnham was attacking is presented by Isaiah Berlin's insistence – against requests that he provide a statement of anti-Communist faith – that there was “no point in defeating the other side if our beliefs at the end of the war are

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<sup>98</sup> Michnik, *The Trouble with History*, 40. On this issue see also Alexander S. Kirshner, *A Theory of Militant Democracy: The Ethics of Combatting Political Extremism* (Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>99</sup> Burnham, *Suicide of the West* (John Day, 1964), 140, 228-9, 280-81, 292, 297-8.



simply the inverse of theirs, just as irrational, despotic, etc.”<sup>100</sup> Hardliners like Burnham insisted that fire must be fought with fire: moderates like Berlin pointed out that such a course would leave much that was of value incinerated. The emulation of anti-liberal methods might allow liberals to retain power, but much of what was essential to liberalism would have been lost – and it is not clear that those in power would still be liberals (either because they had been inwardly transformed into intolerant hardliners, or because they had been supplanted by those who could prosecute militant policies with greater skill and relish).

In short: it often seemed that efficacy, either in pursuit of a freer and more just society or in defense of that level of justice and freedom attained in liberal orders, required a degree of ruthlessness; yet such ruthlessness seemed incompatible with liberalism's commitment to individual rights, and norms of legalism and procedural fairness.

Few liberals consistently embraced policies either of “fighting fire with fire” in the sense of fully emulating the ethics, tactics, and spirit of anti-liberals, or of uncompromising, undeviating fidelity to ideal standards of fairness, tolerance, and forbearance. Those who, like Burnham, embraced an emulation of anti-liberal “realism” tended to abandon liberalism altogether. On the other hand, while they were at pains to guard against dogmatism and fanaticism, Berlin and other “chastened liberals” were ready to go a considerable (in some cases, excessive) way in making compromises and cultivating “toughness”. Liberalism's failures in the first third of the century (and thereafter), and the disasters and crimes that attended on the rise of liberalism's main rivals, suggested that some amount of hand-dirtying would be necessary – but also that complacent acceptance, or perverse reveling in and celebration of, dirty hands was irresponsible and intolerable.

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<sup>100</sup> Berlin to Herbert Elliston, 30 December 1952; in Berlin, *Enlightening: Letters 1945-1960*, ed. Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes (Chatto and Windus, 2009), 349-51.

Defenders of liberalism who were concerned with the ethical challenges presented by anti-liberalism thus had to find a stance which would allow them to avoid both the dangers of political impotence and irrelevance that would follow on adopting a morally purist stance; and the slide into a ruthlessness that would make them scarcely distinguishable from their enemies, and undermine the basic values and goals for which liberalism stood. The challenge was a difficult one: the century was dotted with the bloody marks of liberal failures to avoid one or the other danger – from the inability to defend the Weimar Republic or to make the League of Nations more than a fig leaf; to acceptance of colonialist exploitation, and support for the violent suppression of national liberation movements in the third world; to the desolation of Vietnam and Cambodia, and the support of authoritarian regimes from Iran, Greece and Turkey to Guatemala, Cuba, and Chile (among many others), all in the name of fighting for freedom against Communism.

Given the nature of liberal commitments, and the power of “realist” critiques of moral purism as politically irresponsible, it appears that liberals must cultivate *both* the virtues of “innocence and experience”. But there remain fundamental tensions between these dispositions. These tensions, furthermore, arise not only from practical conflicts between different values and duties, but from the incompatibility of different types of character – of dispositions and motivations which ideally should balance one another, but which may be impossible to bring together in a single self. Nevertheless, I shall pursue a “solution” – or at least, a tolerable and workable response – to the “liberal predicament’ along just this plane of character, by seeking to discover whether there may be a type of character, a set of dispositions, a guiding spirit or “ethos”, which, poised somewhere between “innocence” and “realism”, may do a decent justice to the merits of both, while (generally) avoiding the excesses of each.

### **Part III. Political Ethics and the Idea of Ethos**

*“The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments”* 101

*“Goodness is easier to recognise than to define”* 102

*“In that 'how' lies all the difference”* 103

The liberal response that I will be exploring is distinctive, not only in its preoccupation with anti-liberalism and the (ethical) challenges it presents, but in advocating a certain political ethos – as opposed to articulating regulative principles governing institutional design and procedures, or general principles of political morality.<sup>104</sup> The critique of liberalism and exposition of anti-liberalism, too, took the form of arguments about political ethos. The definition of the term “ethos”, and delineation of the range of linked phenomena which it is meant to pick out, is therefore crucial to understanding both the subjects of this study, and its approach.

#### **A. Politics and Vision (and Disposition and Temper): Identifying the Concept of Ethos**

A number of political theorists, ranging across widely disparate areas of the field, have in recent years turned to the idea of “ethos” – the patterns of disposition, commitment, and response that shape how individuals (or groups) go about acting.<sup>105</sup> This turn reflects a sense that there is

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<sup>101</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking* (Longmans, Green, and Co, 1907), 6.

<sup>102</sup> W.H. Auden, “Morality in an Age of Change” (1938/1939), *Prose Volume I* 477.

<sup>103</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Der Rosenkavalier*

<sup>104</sup> While I believe that the various figures I discuss can be accurately and illuminatingly understood as both concerned with what I term ethos, and as exponents of one or another ethos, not all of them applied the concept of ethos (or something analogous to it) to their own thought or their analysis of others. I shall, in the ensuing discussion, endeavor to identify when a particular author explicitly and consciously identified what I term ethos as an important phenomenon – and when the casting of that author’s work in terms of ethos is my own doing.

<sup>105</sup> E.g. Michel Foucault, “Politics and Ethics: An Interview” (1983), in Paul Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault Reader*

“something else” that political theory should take into account, but which much of it has, of late, neglected – something other than the *basic institutions* that structure political life, *general principles* that may regulate those institutions (as well as individual conduct), and the goods that are worth pursuing as *ends* of political action. The dissatisfaction with approaches to political theory that emphasize principles of justice for institutions, or principles of moral obligation binding on individuals, has often been linked to frustration with or dissent from liberalism, which (largely due to the immense influence of John Rawls's work) has been particularly linked to an approach to political theory as “applied ethics” – that is, as setting out general principles of justice or right; and a focus on principles applying to the institutional structure of society. 106

The turn to ethos reflects not just intellectual impatience, but an awareness of the practical limitations of recent normative theorizing. General principles and rules applying to institutional arrangements are in themselves insufficient to safeguard liberties and uphold justice: individual citizens must be inspired, and competent, to do so. Political theory must focus on questions of motivation, on the constitution or disposition of the will.<sup>107</sup> It must also attend to those dispositions and patterns of judgment that guide how commitments are translated into

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(Pantheon, 1984), 373-80; G. A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Harvard University Press, 2000) idem., *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Harvard University Press, 2008); William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Stephen K. White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen* (Harvard University Press, 2009); James Tully, “Public Philosophy as a Critical Activity”, and other essays collected in *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, Volume I (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>106</sup> It should be stressed that the tendencies that I treat here as linked are often advanced independently, though a certain sort of liberalism is the common target. Thus, one of the most powerful critics of Rawlsian liberalism's focus on institutional principles, G. A. Cohen, was hardly averse to approaching political theory as a form of “applied ethics”. Critics of the “applied ethics” approach do not object to the focus on *institutions* in recent liberalism *per se*; some have tied their project to just such a focus (e.g. Jeremy Waldron, “Political Political Theory”, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 21:1 [March 2013], 1-23) – though other proponents of non-ideal theory have stressed questions of personal conduct (e.g. Mark Philp, *Political Conduct* [Harvard University Press, 2007]). But both objections to liberal theory's *method or orientation*, and to its *focus or scope*, have pointed theorists to concern with ethos.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Sharon Krause, *Liberalism with Honor* (Harvard University Press, 2002), particularly 9-12; idem., *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

action in circumstances where general principles prove too broad, abstract, and unresponsive to particularities to provide sufficient guidance.<sup>108</sup> Such attention is important if liberal theory is to be able to address crucial questions of politics. It is also important for enriching the appeal and persuasiveness of liberalism among the many who find a liberal theory premised on appeals to reasonable consensus over basic institutional principles theoretically unpersuasive or insufficiently compelling.<sup>109</sup>

But while there is a discernible tendency in recent scholarship to repair the omissions of (liberal) political theory through the use of the concept of “ethos”, there has not been convergence on any precise definition of this term – so that to invoke it, without further definition, is not to say much at all. In order for the label to do useful work here, it is necessary to develop an account of what phenomena the concept of ethos picks out and ties together.

*Ethos* is a classical Greek term, without a single exact English equivalent; it is frequently translated as either “character” or “spirit”. The word features prominently in Aristotle's practical writings; but there seem to be (at least) two general, and not very straightforward, senses of “ethos” at work in Aristotle's use of the term. In his discussion of ethics, Aristotle uses *ethos* to distinguish specifically *moral* dispositions (e.g. liberality, gentleness, self-control) from *intellectual* virtues (e.g. wisdom or understanding).<sup>110</sup> On this account *ethos* appears to be non-cognitive or non-rational, and acquired through habituation rather than theoretical

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<sup>108</sup> For a subtle expression of some of the reasons for regarding “abstraction” and generality in political and moral theory as providing insufficient guidance, see Hampshire, “Public and Private Morality”, 23-40.

<sup>109</sup> See e.g. James Gregory, “The Culture of Liberalism and the Virtue of 'Balance'”, *European Journal of Political Theory* 13:1 (January 2014), 78-94.

<sup>110</sup> See Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, 1.13, 1103a.

instruction.<sup>111</sup> Aristotle's *ethos* also seems to be identifiable with (communal) custom.<sup>112</sup> Another sense of the term can be found in Aristotle's discussion of rhetoric, where *ethos* means the *sort* of character one is; to have a particular *ethos* is to be “a certain kind of person”.<sup>113</sup> As a method of persuasion, *ethos* is something the speaker deliberately does in his<sup>114</sup> speech, something over which he has control. Rhetorical *ethos* (as distinguished from *logos*, or argument appealing to reason, and *pathos*, or appealing to the emotional responses of the audience) is a matter of a speaker displaying or revealing himself in the *way* in which he speaks, such that he renders his arguments credible. To do this, a speaker must display a mixture of disposition, intention, and skill, so as to reveal himself to his audience in a certain light, as a certain sort of actor.<sup>115</sup> Rhetorical *ethos* can be informed by perception, reflection, personal dispositions, and a reaction to circumstances, without being identical to any of these.

Aristotle's account of *ethos* as a rhetorical mode tracks many of recent invocations. But it does not stress the important connection between *ethos* and motivation. This connection is underlined by G. A. Cohen, who defines *ethos* as “a structure of response lodged in the motivations that inform everyday life,” and guides individual *choices*. Per Cohen, “social *ethos*”

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<sup>111</sup> See *ibid.*, 2.1, 1103a11-1103b25

<sup>112</sup> See Aristotle, *Politics*. 2.8, 1269a20 (trans. Rackham): “for the law [*nomos*] has no power to compel obedience beside the force of custom [*ethos*].”

<sup>113</sup> Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, trans. G. A. Kennedy (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed, 2007 [1991]), 1.2.4, 1356a.

<sup>114</sup> Throughout, I have tried to alternate gendered pronouns when making my own points, while using male-gendered pronouns in summarizing the arguments of past authors who would have assumed the subjects about whom they were writing would have been male.

<sup>115</sup> *Rhetoric* 2.1, 1378a6. For this account I have drawn on Christof Rapp, “Aristotle's Rhetoric”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2008/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/>.

consists of “the attitudes people sustain toward each other in the thick of daily life.”<sup>116</sup>

Extrapolating from this, we may say that a *political* ethos is the attitude that political actors take and sustain toward their conduct of politics – and toward themselves, and their allies and opponents, as political actors. This way of thinking about themselves and others within “the thick” of politics, in turn, guides their choices about *how* to engage in political action. At the same time, it should be stressed that an ethos is not only action-guiding. The ethical dispositions and perceptions that form an ethos also “provide the agent with a point of view from which the world can be valued” – a perspective which shapes our judgments on “value questions” as well as “practical questions” (that is, questions both of “What would be best” and “What shall I do?”).<sup>117</sup>

There is some resemblance between this understanding of “ethos” and the idea of a political “ethic” famously set out by Max Weber in “Politics as a Vocation”. A Weberian political “ethic” is a way of thinking about the relationship between values and one's actions as a politician, which shapes one's judgments and decisions.<sup>118</sup> Here I have preferred the term “ethos” to the Weberian term “ethic” so as to avoid confusion of what I have termed “political ethos” with “political ethics”(that is, the field of inquiry concerned with questions about “how life should be lived, what men and women should be and do”<sup>119</sup> within the particular context of politics). Such questions of political ethics may be approached without reference to the idea of

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<sup>116</sup> *If You're An Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*, 3, 128; *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 123.

<sup>117</sup> Bernard Williams, “The Primacy of Dispositions”, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, 69. 71

<sup>118</sup> This *motivational* dimension of a Weberian “ethic” is brought out more clearly in Weber, “The Social Psychology of the World Religions”, *From Max Weber*, trans and ed. H H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 267.

<sup>119</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal”, *idem. The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton University Press, 1997), 2..

political ethos – and, indeed, often are (which is one reason for the existence of this study).

An “ethos”, then, is a particular way of understanding and engaging in an activity – a way which reflect certain settled dispositions, attitudes, and perceptions on the part of the agent. It is not a matter of unreflective, habituated practice; it involves a degree of self-reflection – one's political ethos encompasses not only how one goes about acting politically, but also how one thinks about politics, and about one's own role as a political actor. This includes such things as how one understands the realm or activity of politics itself, and the standards of conduct appropriate to it; and also how one understands the proper reference-point of politics. Thus (to take particular examples that will be crucial to the particular liberal and anti-liberal ethe<sup>120</sup> discussed below), one's political ethos will be shaped by whether one regards politics as analogous to a situation of *combat*, and representatives of different political tendencies as related to one another as friends (or allies) and enemies – or whether one regards politics as more analogous to the bargaining process that marks much economic activity, or the communicative and reasoning processes that mark more collaborative activities of intellectual inquiry.

One “dimension” of a political ethos thus concerns an actor's vantage-point, frame of reference, and general framework of interpretation for thinking about politics. As such, ethos is connected to – or, partly constituted by – the “vision” one brings to politics. This is “vision” in the sense of that particular picture of the world that one brings to bear on and through which one understands phenomena. But ethos is also related to another sense of “vision”: vision understood as an agent's *sensibility*, or the *quality* of the way one looks at the world – one's capacity for perception. To have a political ethos marked by, say, generosity – or humility, or compassion, or

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<sup>120</sup> I have preferred to use the Greek plural of ethos, rather than the English plural, since the obscurity and pretentiousness of 'ethe' struck me as less objectionable than the sheer ugliness of 'ethoses' – though I am not very happy with the trade-off.



resoluteness, or flexibility, or “hardness” – means to exhibit, or *strive* to exhibit, personal qualities of generosity, humility, compassion, resolution etc. in one's practice of politics. It *also* means to *value* such qualities as features of political action (or of the dispositions of political actors); and to do so based on a particular conception of how politics should be conducted.

As such, a political ethos is formed by a complex of the propositional and adjectival, doctrinal and dispositional. It involves acting, and thinking about one's activity, in certain ways, and cultivating one's tendency to act and think in those ways, based on a reflective view of the sort of character, behavior and self-understanding that are suited to political action. (This combination of outlook and action is also captured the kindred concept of a “moral style” – the “embodiment in conduct of a moral outlook” which cannot be fully captured in a statement, but which guides conduct – and which may turn out to be more exacting than generalizable moral principles).<sup>121</sup>

In summary, we may say that an ethos consists in the combination of

1) the *dispositions* – the more-or-less stable and recurrent features of that actor's character, which guide thought, choice, and action – that are exhibited by an actor, and those that she respects and cultivates

2) the *sensibility* – the scale of values and sentiments that shape the way a person perceives, evaluates, and responds to experience – possessed and exhibited by an actor

3) the *temper* and *tone* of thought, feeling, and expression – the affective charge that characterizes how one formulates thoughts and action, which partly determines the nature and the outcomes of those thoughts and actions – exhibited in an actor's statements and actions;

4) the *self-understanding* of the actor *qua* actor – that is, how an actor understands the

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<sup>121</sup> Irving Howe, “American Moderns”, in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Morton White, eds. *Paths of American Thought* (Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 314-15

field of activity in which he is engaged, and the nature and demands of his role in that activity

5) the *values* that guide an actor in action.

All of these features of ethos shape the quality of *conduct* of the actor – the way in which she behaves in pursuit of whatever goals, and in putting into action whatever policies or strategies, she may adopt. Conduct is not itself a part of ethos, but is intimately related to it.

This account of ethos is one way of analyzing the role that personal characteristics affect the *quality* of political conduct – which in turn shapes the nature of political life more broadly. Politics – and the field of inquiry known as political ethics – should be approached, not solely through the question of “who does what [and for what reason] to whom”, but through this question *and* the additional question of “*how* do they (the actors) do it (the action) to them?” And this question of “how” should be approached in terms not just of the process of action, but also in terms of the attitudes sustained and the temper and dispositions displayed in the course of actions – qualities which determine the full significance of the action itself. The description and analysis of political action – whether in political science, political theory, or historical studies – should be conducted in a much more adjectival and adverbial style than we have often been accustomed to practice it through our strict attention to causal relations and general prescriptive (or hortative) principles.

In the following sections I will illustrate the framework of ethos through discussion of examples. These examples will, I hope, also go some way to explaining why the concept of ethos is relevant both to exploring the phenomenon of morally-inspired political ruthlessness; and to properly perceiving what the conflict between liberal and anti-liberal politics was all about.

## **B. Thinking about – and With – Ethos**

### **1. Ruthlessness as an Ethos**

The implications of the distinction between ethics and ethos for analytical practice can be seen in the case of the phenomenon with which I began this chapter. As noted then, ruthlessness marks both a way of thinking, and a way of acting. In both cases, it can be described in terms of an ethical position: that one can, indeed should, engage in *any* means that are efficacious to the achievement of one's desired goal, no matter how much they violate other ethical considerations. But this definition, in its generality and abstraction, does not capture all of the features of ruthlessness. Furthermore, ruthlessness may draw on elements that some would not consider specifically *ethical*—certain perceptions of fact, for instance, or matters of inclination or taste.

Ruthlessness is thus best understood as a feature of ethos – a matter of sensibility and disposition which is related, but not reducible, to propositional argument or belief. As a feature of the way in which one thinks about one's role and values, ruthlessness indicates a particular type of ethical deliberation – which disregards any considerations that qualify, or interfere with, judging a course of action in terms of efficacy in achieving some single primary goal. As a feature of disposition and sentiment, ruthlessness refers to a lack of reservation and remorse when engaging in actions that harm people or violate commonly-held moral standards; and an insensitivity to the complaints of others – a failure to perceive or consider that they may have a just grievance.<sup>122</sup> It also, related to this, indicates a single-minded intentness on a single goal – “an inveteracy of pursuit that knew neither rest nor conscience”.<sup>123</sup> Ruthlessness involves

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<sup>122</sup> Cf. Williams, “Politics and Moral Character”, 61: “The politician who just could not see that they [the victims of a policy for which the politician is responsible] had a complaint, and who, after he had explained the situation to them, genuinely thought that their complaint was based on misunderstanding and that they were unreasonable to make it ... is a politician whose dispositions are already such as to raise our questions in a very pressing form.” Williams' concern with this phenomenon – the failure to recognize that losers in certain conflicts of values have just grounds for complain – is at the heart of his defense of pluralism against those who would deny the reality of genuine moral dilemmas. See *ibid.*, 62-3; Williams, “Liberalism and Loss” in Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla and Robert B. Silvers, eds. *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York Review Books, 2001), 91-103.

<sup>123</sup> Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, in *The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. George

pursuing “a pure and uncompromising ideal, seemingly undiluted by lesser loyalties”; it is, as such, opposed to a liberal ethos of “tolerance, epistemic modesty, open-mindedness”.<sup>124</sup>

This analysis, in addition to giving us a better grip on the phenomenon of ruthlessness, also helps illuminate the relationship between ethos and ethics. An “ethic of ruthlessness” may be thought of as a normative position, expressible in terms of propositions, which points to the conclusion that one should adopt an ethos of ruthlessness; seen from a different perspective, an ethic of ruthlessness is a way of justifying or rationalizing (that is, making amenable to propositional argument) an ethos of ruthlessness. Accepting the proposition of ruthlessness may lead one to cultivate an ethos of ruthlessness; being dispositionally ruthless may dispose one to accept an ethic of ruthlessness as intuitively plausible (or indeed self-evidently true). But they are different things. At the same time, what I am calling an “ethos of ruthlessness” involves more than just the disposition to act ruthlessly: it also involves a normative endorsement of a ruthless disposition as appropriate to, and worthy of approbation in, political action (or other activities) – and a conscious cultivation of those dispositions.

Finally, the case of ruthlessness points to another feature of the concept of ethos: the way in which a particular ethos may be analyzed and characterized. Since an ethos is not reducible to a theory or argument, but is inseparable from certain features of the character of an action and of the actor undertaking the action, it must be evoked through the description of these characteristics, rather than being stated (merely) in terms of propositions. Thus, the proper objects for the analysis of ethos are individuals, movements, campaigns, and ideologies, rather than theories as such; the proper tools for analyzing ethos are historical and psychological, as

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Parsons Lathrop, Volume 3 (Houghton, Mifflin & Co, 1883), 151.

<sup>124</sup> K. Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 220. The core argument of this paragraph is particularly indebted to discussions with Sean Ingham.

well as philosophical.

It should be stressed at this juncture that I am not suggesting that an agent's ethos in itself determines the justice of that agent's actions, or the legitimacy of his/her/its claims to rule. To continue with the present example: that there may be cases where ruthless politicians are perfectly entitled or justified in exercising power, and when the things that they do are justifiable or correct, is not something that I – or most of the figures on whom I focus here – deny. What they are allied in claiming, and what I wish to suggest, is that the dimension of ethos determines the *quality* of deliberation and action, and that in many individual cases – and in political conduct across cases – such qualitative differences can be significant, or indeed decisive, in shaping the moral *quality* and *significance* of actions.<sup>125</sup> This quality of actions, and of character, is also separate from the goals which actions aim at, or the particular policies adopted: one can pursue the same goal through ruthless actions and in a ruthless spirit, or in a very different spirit and through scrupulous and moderate actions. It is also possible to come to favor the same policy – say, the state's peremptory seizure of certain private property – through modes of reasoning, and to embrace and pursue such a policy in a spirit marked by, dogmatism and maximalism – or, to the contrary, pragmatism and moderation.

The perception of the importance of ethos is itself distinct from commitment to any single ethos, as well as any particular policy. Those who share the perception and analysis of ruthlessness as a feature of a distinctive political ethos have in many cases been critics of ruthlessness. But others have been *proponents* of ruthlessness: they have taken ruthlessness to be a mark of virtue, a dispositional feature which leads agents (and may be necessary to enable agents) to do the right thing, and which also invests actions with a particular ethical excellence. It

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<sup>125</sup> Cf. Bernard Williams, "Politics and Moral Character", in Hampshire, *Public and Private Morality*, 55-73.

is to this tendency that I now turn.

## 2, Anti-liberalism as an “Ethical” Project

*“Some sort of rationalistic fanaticism overcame my doubts, my pangs of conscience and simple feelings of sympathy, pity and shame, but this fanaticism was nourished not only by speculative newspaper and literary sources. More convincing than these were people who in my eyes embodied, personified our truth and our justice, people who confirmed with their lives that it was necessary to clench your teeth, clench your heart and carry out everything the party and the Soviet power ordered”<sup>126</sup>*

In addition to helping us to make sense of certain general ethical phenomena such as ruthlessness, the concept of ethos can help us better make sense of the historical movements with which we are concerned. The anti-liberals cited above (Lenin, Trotsky, Brecht), and many others, centered their critique of liberalism, and their positive political visions, on judgments about different types of political ethos; the practical project of anti-liberalism was to supplant the affirmation and the cultivation one sort of ethos with the affirmation and cultivation of another.

This is apparent in one of the first classic statements of an ethic and ethos of revolutionary fanaticism: S. G. Nechaev's “Catechism of a Revolutionist” (1869). Best known for its affirmation of the ethical motto of end-maximalism (“the end justifies the means”), Nechaev's work also articulates the sensibility that would continue to pervade the anti-liberal ethos. The revolutionist is an ascetic, denuded of personal interests and attachments: “Everything in him is wholly absorbed in the single thought and the single passion for revolution”. And passion itself must be “employed with cold calculation”. All that is extraneous to realizing the ultimate goal must be purged from the revolutionist's thoughts and character:

All the gentle and enervating sentiments of kinship, love, friendship, gratitude, and even honor, must be suppressed ... and give place to the cold and single-minded passion for revolution. For him, there exists only one pleasure, one consolation, one reward, one satisfaction – the success of the revolution. Night and day he must have but one thought,

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<sup>126</sup> Kopelev, *The Education of a True Believer*, 235.

one aim -- merciless destruction. Striving cold-bloodedly and indefatigably toward this end, he must be prepared to destroy himself and to destroy with his own hands everything that stands in the path of the revolution.<sup>127</sup>

Nechaev thus encouraged a highly *instrumental* attitude toward human beings.

Revolutionists should regard themselves, and one another, as “capital” to be expended (as economically as possible) on behalf of the revolution. The people themselves were an instrument, to be used and sacrificed in whatever way best served the revolution: since the more miserable the people were, the more inclined to revolution they would be, the revolutionary movement should “use all its resources and energy toward increasing and intensifying the evils and miseries of the people until at last their patience is exhausted”.<sup>128</sup>

Among the young radicals influenced by Nechaev's sermon was the young V. I. Ulyanov – later known as Lenin. Lenin's importance for his century should not be understated; nor should his appeal to idealists who wanted to make a difference be underestimated in retrospect. This appeal lay largely in Lenin's model of idealistic yet practical asceticism. (The young Auden, for example, reckoned Lenin one of the two men – the other being T. E. Lawrence – whose lives exemplified “most completely what is best and significant in our time, our nearest approach to a synthesis of feeling and reason, act and thought, the most potent agents of freedom and to us, egotistical underlings, the most relevant accusation and hope”.<sup>129</sup>) At the same time, Lenin's writings and arguments were marked by a “style of thought” notable for its “coarseness and

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<sup>127</sup> Nechaev and Bakunin, “The Catechism of a Revolutionist”, accessed at <http://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/Nqv.catechism.thm.htm>. Here literary style communicates the ethos prescribed and exemplified: in order to reinforce the point that revolution must be the single, obsessive end of the revolutionist's thought and action, he ends every sentence by naming the ultimate goal (“revolution” or, in one case – and this amounts to the same thing – “destruction”).

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Auden, “T. E. Lawrence” (1934), *Prose Volume I* 62.

aggressiveness”.<sup>130</sup> His sensibility is conveyed by his favored phraseology: “smashing” “crushing” “iron hand”. Lenin's style – as he acknowledged – was “calculated to evoke in the reader hatred, aversion and contempt for people” who opposed the Bolsheviks; it was “not calculated to convince, but to break up the ranks of the opponent; not to correct the mistake of the opponent, but to destroy him, to wipe his organizations off the face of the earth.”<sup>131</sup> Opposing views had to be “swept away” like the “old and dangerous rubbish” they were.<sup>132</sup> Unanimity was laudable and necessary, both because there was only one true position, and because differences of opinion indicated a lack of decisiveness and focus, and led to weakness; therefore “[w]e must make it quite clear that we cannot have arguments about deviations and that we must put a stop to that.”<sup>133</sup> Lenin favored simplicity, clarity, and absolutism, as evidenced by such passages as “There is no middle course”; or “Such, and only such, is the way the situation developed. Such, and only such, is the view that can be taken by a politician who does not fear the truth”; “Doubt is out of the question”; or “all this is elementary. All this is clear and simple. Why replace this with some kind of rigmarole ...?”<sup>134</sup>

While Lenin presented his views as the only correct application of Marxism, he also adjusted his position to fit the demands of events, rejecting intransigent opposition to short-term compromise as “childishness, hard even to take seriously”. Thus in March 1918, defending the conclusion of peace terms with Germany and Austria, he dismissed the objective of world-wide

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<sup>130</sup> Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 767, 772.

<sup>131</sup> *Works* 12:424-5, quoted *ibid* 773.

<sup>132</sup> *Works* Vol 30 (September 1919-April 1920), 459, quoted Kolakowski 760.

<sup>133</sup> *Works* Vol 32, 177-8, quoted Kolakowski 767.

<sup>134</sup> *Revolution at the Gates*, 21, 104, 106, 110, 134; *'Left-Wing' Communism – an Infantile Disorder* (International Publishers, 1940 [1921]), 26.



revolution as “a very good fairy-tale, a very beautiful fairy-tale – I quite understand children liking beautiful fairy-tales. But I ask, is it proper for a serious revolutionary to believe fairy-tales?”<sup>135</sup> The tough pragmatism that countenanced strategic compromise could equally countenance the complete repression of opponents, which must be accepted as part of the course of revolution. After all, revolution was, as Engels had noted, “certainly the most authoritarian thing that is possible”: it is “the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets, and cannons ... And the victorious party of necessity is compelled to maintain its rule by means of fear which its arms inspire in the reactionaries”.<sup>136</sup> Lenin urged his comrades to deal with their opponents in a “plebeian” way, “mercilessly exterminating the enemies of freedom, strangling by force their resistance, without making any concessions on behalf of the accursed legacy of subjection.”<sup>137</sup>

Lenin's style and image shaped the ethos of the Communist Party: one marked by “discipline, business efficiency, utter emotional identification and a sense of *total* dedication”.<sup>138</sup> This ethos was indispensable to Communism's political achievements, and at the roots of its moral disasters.<sup>139</sup> In promoting an ethos of hardness, ruthlessness, realism, single-minded commitment to the cause and unscrupulousness in its service, Lenin had cultivated a contempt for idealism, innocence, compassion, ambivalence, and doubt. Under Stalin and his henchmen,

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<sup>135</sup> “Left-Wing” *Communism*, 22; *Works* Vol 27, 102; quoted Tracy Strong, *Politics Without Vision: Thinking Without a Bannister in the Twentieth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 204.

<sup>136</sup> *State and Revolution*, 56-7.

<sup>137</sup> Lenin quoted Adam Michnik, *The Trouble with History*, ed. Irena Grudzenska-Gross (Yale University Press, 2014), 69.

<sup>138</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 133. This reflected Lenin's calls for a revolutionary vanguard marked by “strict, iron discipline”, “unconditional boldness”, and “supreme courage and determination” (*The State and Revolution*, 45, 106; *Revolution at the Gates*, 112).

<sup>139</sup> Cf. Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 777.

this ethos of crude contempt for all that was perceived as “weakness” or “innocence” hardened, while the utopian aspirations that had first led the Bolsheviks to an ethos of fanaticism withered. The result was, very often, an ethos of bullies – of those who took pleasure in exercising power over others, while at the same time being positively angered by their subjects weakness – a weakness which justified further domination, and demanded *punishment* in the form of cruelty.

The combination of a morally-inspired and all-absorbing sense of mission with cold instrumentalism is also Brecht's lesson in *The Measures Taken*, a central message of which is the need to discipline the dispositions of compassion and honesty for the sake of truly helping humanity. To the Young Comrade's exclamation that the suffering of the peasants is unendurable, the representatives of the Party reply that “suffering is not enough”.<sup>140</sup> To change the world requires utter constancy in dedication to the ultimate goal, combined with utter flexibility and lack of scruples concerning action: “He who fights for Communism/ Must be able to fight and not fight/ Must tell the truth and not tell the truth ...He who fights for Communism/ Has of all virtues only one:/ That he fights for Communism”.<sup>141</sup> As significant as the play's explicit lesson is its tone and approach: Brecht presents simple, pat prescriptions stone-facedly, flatly. There is no sense of complexity and difficulty: there is a right way, which can be learned, and must be adhered to with almost robotic devotion.

This ethos of revolutionary resoluteness and ruthlessness presented a stark contrast to the perceived softness and sentimentality of liberalism; and adherence to this ethos fed into what Isaiah Berlin called the “contempt for liberalism” that marked much advanced thought – on both

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<sup>140</sup> Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, 26.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

the right and the left.<sup>142</sup> Lenin's attack on liberalism was often expressed in terms of – and, one suspects, partly inspired by – a repulsion from the “lifeless, insipid and impotent way of thinking” that marked reformism.<sup>143</sup> Calling activists in Ukraine during the terror-famine to action, one Party leader declared that ““You must assume your duties with a feeling of the strictest Party responsibility, without whimpering, without any rotten liberalism. Throw your bourgeois humanitarianism out of the window and act like Bolsheviks worthy of Comrade Stalin ... This is no time for squeamishness or rotten sentimentality ... What's required from you is Bolshevik alertness, intransigence and courage.”<sup>144</sup>

The anti-liberal critique of liberalism was thus an attack on liberalism as an ethos. The defense of liberalism, accordingly, had to take the form of a defense – and also a revision, or revivification – of an ethos of political action suitable to a liberal politics.

### 3. Liberalism and Ethos: A Survey and Preview

Explicating this defense of a liberal political ethos – or, a political ethos well-suited to the demands of liberalism – and exploring its lessons and limitations, will be the main work of the study that follows. I will show in detail how selected proponents of liberalism (some of whom were more comfortable embracing that label than others) were concerned with the phenomenon of political ruthlessness, the conflicting claims of political realism and moral idealism, the ethical temptations and challenges facing liberalism as it was confronted by anti-liberalism. And I will show how their responses involved – and cannot be made full sense of without attention to – the

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<sup>142</sup> Berlin to Geoffrey Faber, 4 January 1932 (reporting on *Das Ende des Kapitalismus* by Ferdinand Friedrich Zimmermann; in Berlin, *Flourishing: Letters 1928-1946* ed. Henry Hardy (Chatto and Windus, 2004), 640; Berlin, “Soviet Beginnings” (review of E. H. Carr, *A History of Soviet Russia*, Vol. 1: *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917–1923*, *Sunday Times*, 10 December 1950, 3. In these passage Berlin applied this phrase to, respectively, a German Nazi publicist, and a British admirer of the Soviet Union (and sometime admirer of Nazi Germany).

<sup>143</sup> *The State and Revolution*, 20 (quoting Engels).

<sup>144</sup> Quoted Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom*, 91-2.

articulation and application of a political ethos (or, a certain family of ethos which, despite some variation, were significantly overlapping and congruent) which, they claimed, made possible a politics that would be friendly to liberal norms and goals. Here I offer a few general remarks on the impulse they represented, and the project they undertook.

Proponents of a “tempered” liberalism undertook three broad, interlinked tasks. First, they sought to *critically reconstruct* or *revise* liberalism – to identify and correct for liberalism's internal weaknesses and failings, as revealed in the criticisms of its opponents, and its failures in responding to these opponents. Second, they sought to re-conceive liberalism as defined by a particular “temper”, a “certain condition ... of mind or state of being”, rather than as merely or purely defined by a particular set of institutions or policies.<sup>145</sup> Finally, they sought (with varying degrees of self-consciousness) to not only explicate, but *exemplify*, this liberal spirit.

Typical of this strain of liberalism were the post-war writings of the American literary critic Lionel Trilling. Trilling directed attention to what he termed “the morality of morality”: reflection, not on what course of action should be chosen, but on the *quality* of the moral life lived in pursuit of that course. It was, Trilling suggested, through individual “sensitivity” and “manner” that “political views” are related to the “character of our personal being”, and both are related to the way we actually live our lives.<sup>146</sup> In Trilling's case, this was connected to a particular sensitivity (at times, perhaps, an over-sensitivity) to the dangerous congruence of innocence, moral simplicity, self-righteousness and thirst for power – the way in which the desire to be thought and think oneself virtuous could fuel anger and aggression. Trilling's book *The Liberal Imagination* was written with the intention of attacking Stalinism's influence on

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<sup>145</sup> Lionel Trilling, “Sermon on a Text from Whitman” (1945), reprinted in *Speaking of Literature and Society*, ed. Diana Trilling (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980), 210.

<sup>146</sup> Trilling, *E. M. Forster* (New Directions, 1964 [1943]), 8-9, 124.

American liberal thought. Stalinism for Trilling involved not a doctrine or party identification, but a disposition – a hostility to complexity, paradox, irony, and spiritedness, which afflicted many liberals (including *both* those who were uncritically indulgent toward Communism, and those whose anti-Communism was rigid and fundamentalist), as well as actual Stalinists. The book's title was both revealing and ironic: liberalism was a matter not of doctrine but of “imagination”; but the problem with contemporary liberalism was that it wasn't imaginative enough.<sup>147</sup> Liberalism, Trilling insisted, had to cultivate disposition of “worldliness” – an “acceptance of man in the world without the sentimentality of cynicism and without the sentimentality of rationalism”; and “moral realism”, which meant “not the awareness of morality itself but of the contradictions, paradoxes and dangers of living the moral life”, and the perception not only of good and evil in the world, but of the “inextricable tangle” of “good-and-evil”.<sup>148</sup>

Trilling was exceptional in his sensitivity to psychological subtleties, and the rigor of his anti-moralistic moralism. But the temper and style which he advocated and sought to exhibit were shared by many of his liberal contemporaries. Reflecting on the examples of Toller, Lukacs and Weber, Daniel Bell would call for his fellow liberals to embrace “the ethic of responsibility, the politics of civility, the fear of the zealot and the fanatic – and of the moral man willing to sacrifice his morality in the egoistic delusion of total despair”.<sup>149</sup> This spirit was suspicious of haste, intolerance, certitude and sweeping claims and ambitions. But this liberal ethos also sought to foster an alert sensitivity to human suffering, which would not only reinforce suspicion

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<sup>147</sup> “Surely if liberalism has a single desperate weakness, it is an inadequacy of imagination: liberalism is always being surprised.” (*E. M. Forster*, 13).

<sup>148</sup> *E. M. Forster*, 11-12, 23.

<sup>149</sup> Bell, “First Love and Early Sorrows”:, 550-51.

of ambitious crusades that threatened to result in gratuitous “bloodshed and misery”, but also sustain a resolute determination to act, cautiously and modestly, without either unfounded optimism or unbounded aggression, against the evils that menaced liberal institutions, and human lives, from both within and without.<sup>150</sup>

As Bell's invocation of Weber and Toller suggests, the pursuit of an ethos for liberal politics was conducted against an intellectual backdrop dominated by the two conflicting tendencies identified above: an assertion of absolute standards of morality in the face of political evils, and an assertion of the autonomy of politics from morality, and of a distinctively political ethics of results-oriented prudence. The liberals studied here, confronted with the experiences of politics in the early twentieth century, had come to conclude that a “[d]ecent political existence lies somewhere between” a ruthlessness which subordinates all moral considerations to some single ultimate objective – or cynically rejects moral considerations altogether – on the one hand; and “an absurd failure to recognize that if politics is to exist as an activity at all, some moral considerations must be expected to get out of its way”. They therefore sought to map out and inhabit a “space between cynicism and political idiocy” – a terrain of genuinely political ethics and ethical politics.<sup>151</sup>

This middle space of decency is harder to describe in detail than it is to gesture at – and harder still to inhabit in practice, especially since the alternatives of moral purity and pure pragmatism. This was all the more true because the alternatives offered emotional satisfactions and an intellectual consistency and clarity (which itself constituted a form of emotional satisfaction for intellectuals). And the excesses of both a ruthlessly unscrupulous “realism” and

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<sup>150</sup> Camus, “Neither Victims Nor Executioners”, 52.

<sup>151</sup> Williams, “Politics and Moral Character”, 64, 68.

ruthlessly inflexible “moralism” each pointed to the plausibility of arguments for the opposite position – so that liberals repulsed by one pole found themselves driven toward the other.

Such an impulse was not wholly mistaken, or destructive. Identifying the content of this middle space required drawing on insights offered by the champions of both austere moral absolutism, and hard-headed realism. Those seeking to work out an account of political ethics, and to convey a political ethos, which could guide champions of liberalism through the shoals of politics thus recognized the force of, and drew on, both “realist” critiques of moral absolutism and political romanticism, and “idealist” critiques of the brutalities of *realpolitik*.

Therefore, in tracing the line of liberal ethical response examined here, I begin with the particularly powerful critique of “moralism” as an orientation toward politics, and “realism” as the proper political stance, in the work of Max Weber; and the morally-inspired advocacy of revolutionary *realpolitik* in the work of Weber's friend Lukacs. I also stress how ambiguous many of these arguments were – how both critiques, and elements, of “realism” and “moralism” were intermingled throughout discussions of political ethics. And I show that the objects of critique and advocacy were not doctrines about political ethics, but different conceptions of political ethos. I then further illustrate the interplay between ethical, political and historical doctrines and the formation of ethos – and between impulses toward moral purism and absolutism – through a reading of Arthur Koestler's dissection of the anti-liberal mentality in his novel *Darkness at Noon*.

These explorations of the ambiguous liberalism and complex political ethics of Weber, the anti-liberalism of Lukacs, and the anti-liberal ethos depicted by Koestler sets the stage for the ensuing discussion of the liberal response. I bring out both the core features of this response, and its varying emphases, through studies of the ways in which Reinhold Niebuhr, Isaiah Berlin, and

Adam Michnik took up and responded to political ruthlessness and its moral-psychological roots and rationales – and did so both by stressing the importance of what I have termed the ethos guiding political action, and by exhibiting a liberal ethos in the way in which they developed and presented their ideas, and responded to particular political questions.

In the conclusion I draw together my studies of individual figures with more recent work in moral philosophy and political theory, to formulate a more general and programmatic response to the political-ethical challenges posed in this introduction. I also bring the historical account I have developed into dialog with more recent work in political theory in another way, using it to gain perspective on more recent critiques of liberalism which, while directed against a different type of liberal theory, repeat many of the charges of earlier ethical critiques of liberalism.

At the same time, I hope that an approach to liberalism that foregrounds the dimension of ethos will contribute to enlarging recent discussions of liberalism's virtues and weaknesses. Many recent critiques of liberalism – at least, most of the academically respectable ones – tend to approach liberalism as a matter of doctrine, rather than character. As such, they avoid the *ad hominem* character of Frost's formulation, or Trotsky's attacks. But doctrines are created and adopted, and politics are made, by people; if we are concerned with liberalism as a lived outlook, and with its implications for our political life, a certain sort of *ad hominem* approach should not be avoided.

My focus on ethos is, indeed, meant as a corrective to the frequent tendency (one exhibited, in some moments, by the figures I have been discussing and appropriating) to attribute political tendencies to “ideas”: to see in features of doctrine the root causes of political behavior. This view is not wholly false – there is merit in the sort of studies, tracing the political disasters of the day through intellectual genealogies and to underlying assumptions and theoretical



frameworks, offered by figures such as Berlin (or by Strauss, Arendt, Camus, Kolakowski, or members of the Frankfurt School such as Horkheimer and Adorno). But I am also inclined to agree with Trilling's observation that

We have come to believe that some ideas can betray us, others save us. The educated classes are learning to blame ideas for our troubles, rather than blaming what is a very different thing – our own bad thinking. This is the great vice of academicism, that it is concerned with ideas rather than with thinking, and nowadays the errors of academicism do not stay in the academy; they make their way into the world, and what begins as a failure of perception among intellectual specialists finds its fulfillment in policy and action.<sup>152</sup>

At their best, the figures studied here (and others) were sensitive to the interplay of “thinking” and “ideas” – and to the way in which thinking involves matters of sensibility and disposition as well as doctrine.

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<sup>152</sup> Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 192.

# **Part I. Between the Spirit of Tragedy and the Spirit of Utopia: Political Ethics and the Crisis of Liberalism in Early Twentieth- Century Europe**

## **Chapter 1. A Liberal Ethos Between Realism and Conviction: The Enigmatic Ethics of Max Weber**

*“Policy making is not a moral trade, nor can it be.”<sup>153</sup>*

*Two souls, alas!, dwell in my breast,  
and each would be severed from the other<sup>154</sup>*

Whatever one thinks of A. N. Whitehead's claim that the history of philosophy can be read as a series of footnotes to Plato, much of the history of political ethics that I will be exploring can be framed as a series of commentaries on, or (mis)applications of, the thought of Max Weber.<sup>155</sup> In this chapter, I use Weber's work, first, to explore many of the themes that will occupy, the instincts and commitments that will motivate, and the alternative positions that will structure, the ensuing discussion. Weber's political thought, I show, revolved around the rival claims of political realism and moral idealism, and the corresponding “ethics” of responsibility and conviction; on closer examination, his work also provides a more fine-grained taxonomy of different types of moral purism and political realism. Weber's arguments typify many elements of a “realist” approach to politics, and critique of ethical idealism and absolutism.<sup>156</sup> At the same

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<sup>153</sup> Weber, quoted H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, “Introduction”, *From Max Weber*, 39.

<sup>154</sup> *Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust/ Die eine will sich von der andern trennen*” (Goethe, *Faust* Part I).

<sup>155</sup> Cf. the claim that “There can be no correct understanding of Western European democracy without an understanding of its liberalism, and Weber is a central spokesman on both subjects.” (Peter Ghosh, “Political Thought that Mattered Politically”, *History of European Ideas* 38:2 (June 2012), 319.

<sup>156</sup> This formulation points to a certain tension in my discussion: between using Weber as a representative of a “realist” position, and drawing out the elements in his writings that depart or point beyond realism as I have characterized it in the previous chapter, and as it has often been characterized in recent literature. I will return

time, Weber helps to highlight dangers in both schools of thought – and the way in which they could converge in practice.

Second, I use Weber's experiences and responses as a vehicle for connecting these themes to the circumstances of early twentieth-century European thought and politics, showing how these ethical positions and preoccupations arose in response to attacks on liberal and democratic politics.

Thirdly, Weber provides a good illustration of how reflection on political ethics may be explored through the concept of ethos. He also provides the first – if also the most ambiguous – of a series of case-studies in how concern with political ethics and ethos shaped *liberalism* in the twentieth century. Weber, I will argue, represents an early example of the larger attempt to develop a “tempered” liberalism that could meet the demands of twentieth-century politics. He sought to find a political approach that avoided the intolerant fanaticism or impotent gentleness that might follow from a puristic or absolutist approach, while also disavowing the cynicism of pure power politics. In doing so, he anticipated – and in many cases, provided a model and resource – for later defenders of liberalism. But the marriage of hard-headed realism and moral seriousness Weber proposed also inspired some of liberalism's most sophisticated, challenging opponents. Both the ethics and ethos articulated by liberals such as Niebuhr, Berlin, and Michnik – and those articulated by anti-liberals such as Lukacs – can be seen as reflecting the problems that Weber confronted, and the tensions within his response.

#### **A. An anti-'Ethical' Ethic?: Weber's Attacks on “Panmoralism” and Realpolitik**

Weber's famous lecture “Politics as a Vocation” (1919) has been read by some as a defense of *realpolitik* and rejection of absolute ethical constraints on political action; Weber has

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briefly to the question of Weber's relationship to contemporary realists in the Conclusion.

accordingly been perceived as a “cold-blooded *realpolitiker*” and “modern Machiavelli”.<sup>157</sup>

And, while the same lecture is perceived by many readers as a critique of political “extremism” and a defense of moderation, Weber's “ethic of responsibility” proves, on closer examination, to be tied to dedication to a *cause* (*Sache*). His preferred political approach may thus appear to be a matter, not of moderation and forbearance, but of the pursuit of political success for the sake of some larger purpose, unbounded by ethical constraints – a mixture of “realism” and ruthless consequentialism or fanaticism.<sup>158</sup>

The view of Weber as proponent of ruthless power-politics is reinforced by his Inaugural Address as Professor at the University of Freiburg, “The Nation State and Economic Policy” (1895)<sup>159</sup> – which, Weber proudly noted, caused a scandal by the ‘brutality’ of its views and language.<sup>160</sup> Here Weber sets out many of the core tenets of “political realism”: 1) an assertion of the *autonomy* of politics, both from the logic of economics (which is the primary object of Weber's attack) *and* from the logic of ethics; 2) the idea that the essence of politics is *conflict* over goals – and thus, also the competition for (coercive) power as a means to achieving one's goals against others; 3) an assertion of the (relative) power of the *nation-state* as the prime criterion and goal of political striving; and 4) an ethos of realism marked by somber

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<sup>157</sup> Quoted in Sung Ho Kim, *Max Weber's Politics of Civil Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 110-111.

<sup>158</sup> See e.g. the interpretation in Stefan Breuer, “The Illusion of Politics: Politics and Rationalization in Max Weber and Georg Lukács”, trans. Robert C. Maier, *New German Critique* No. 26, (Spring – Summer 1982), 78. This element in Weber's thought is also stressed – though in balance with other, complicating elements – in the work of Harvey Goldman, Tracy Strong, and Dana Villa, cited below.

<sup>159</sup> Translated in Weber, *Political Writings* [PW], ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Spiers (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1-28.

<sup>160</sup> Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: A Biography* [1926], trans. Harry Zohn (Transaction, 1988), 216; see also *ibid.* 197, Lawrence Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber* (University of California Press, 1991), 120-23.

determination, clear-eyed recognition of facts, and steady focus on the pursuit of national power. These could be seen as, together, representing a rejection of moral constraints on the pursuit of political objectives – and of traditional liberalism, with its attempt to constrain political struggle by subjecting it to ethical principles and economic interests.<sup>161</sup>

This early affirmation of *realpolitik* reflected a larger tendency in Weber's intellectual milieu. As his colleague (and sometime lodger) Ernst Troeltsch incisively wrote,

“The political thought of Germany [in 1922, two years after Weber's death] is marked by a curious dilemma ... Look at one of its sides, and you will see an abundance of remnants of Romanticism and lofty idealism; look at the other, and you will see a realism which goes to the verge of cynicism and of utter indifference to all ideals and all morality. But what you will see above all is an inclination to make an astonishing combination of the two elements – in a word, to brutalize romance, and to romanticize cynicism”<sup>162</sup>

Weber's whole intellectual and political development reflected the clash between ethical idealism and *realpolitik*; and his own arguments about political ethics alternatively succumbed to, and struggled against, the tendency noted by Troeltsch to combine romanticism and cynicism, idealism and brutality. As a boy, Weber had adopted a hard-bitten, “realistic” viewpoint. Thus he dismissed Cicero as an irresponsible dilettante, who indulged in windy speeches when he should have simply “bumped off” Catiline.<sup>163</sup>

This precocious pose of “matter-of-factness” (perhaps reflecting the attitudes of Weber's politician father) contrasted with the ethical rigorism of Weber's mother and her family, whose

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<sup>161</sup> The anti-liberal implications of this type of “realism” is revealed in the later writings of Carl Schmitt, which develop these lines of argument. See Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923), trans. Ellen Kennedy (MIT Press, 1985); idem., *The Concept of the Political* (1932), trans. G. Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>162</sup> Troeltsch, “The Ideas of Natural Law and Humanity in World Politics”, in Otto Gierke, *Natural Law and the Theory of Society* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1957), 214.

<sup>163</sup> Weber quoted Gerth and Mills, FMW 4.

liberal-Christian idealism reflected the influence of the American Unitarian theologian William Ellery Channing. On reading his work, young Max found Channing's views "childlike" and "naive" – and violently objected to his blanket condemnation of war. But he also found Channing's idealism "refreshing." Weber respected the claims of Channing's ideals – but also respected the rival claims of "an active heroic ethic", which not only countenanced force, but was devoted to "cultural", as opposed to properly moral, values. For Weber, "the God of the Gospels did not have any claim to exclusive dominion over the soul. He had to share them with other 'gods', particularly the demands of the fatherland and of scientific truth."'<sup>164</sup>

As a *pluralist*, Weber held that there is no single ultimate *meaning* of the world to be discovered; rather there are multiple "highest ideals", which "move us most forcefully", in light of which life is invested with multiple, conflicting meanings. Human beings find themselves "subject to the struggle between multiple sets of values, each of which, viewed separately, seems to impose an obligation" on them. These values were irreconcilable in their demands; hence "their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion". The pluralism recognized by Weber existed both between life-spheres, each with its own internal standards (or "laws"); and *within* different spheres of value, in which appropriate values clashed. Weber portrayed such conflict as tragic – but also as promoting a type of human character marked by independence and ethical self-awareness. Indeed, he went so far as to suggest that *conflict* was necessary to the *formation* of value: "the highest ideals, which move us most forcefully, are always formed only in the struggle with other ideals which are just as sacred to others as ours are to us."<sup>165</sup> This did not

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<sup>164</sup> All quotes in this paragraph taken from Marianne Weber, *op. cit.*, 86-90; see also *ibid* 322.

<sup>165</sup> Weber, "'Objectivity' in Social Science", in *idem.*, *Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans and ed. Edward Shils and Henry A. Finch (Free Press, 1949), 57; "Between Two Laws", PW 79; "Science as a Vocation", FMW

leave Weber indifferent between different positions. Recognition of the inevitability of value-conflict “ruled out certain kinds of value position[s] as untenable”, for “those who believed that all good things could somehow coincide in some future Utopia and refused to admit the necessity for choices between them, were too naive to be taken seriously ... the inevitability of conflict between groups and individuals ruled out that range of ideals for mankind in which peace and happiness formed a substantial part: such ideals could only be illusory”.<sup>166</sup>

Foremost among the “illusions” attacked by Weber was the “unspeakably philistine softening of sensibility ... which believes it is possible to replace political with 'ethical' ideals”.<sup>167</sup> Weber's distinction between politics and “ethics” (or morality<sup>168</sup>) reflected a robust conception of the demands of the life-sphere of morality. On this view (which reflected the influence of Kant, Tolstoy, and earlier Christian mystics), morality was defined by an imperative to treat other human beings always as ends in themselves, and never as means to some further purpose; and to *love* one's fellow human beings, according them and their ends just as much value as one accords oneself.<sup>169</sup>

Weber saw politics, too, as autonomous, one of those “life orders” with its own form, means, type of demands, “impositions”, and opportunities. Politics is set apart from other orders

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152; “Politics as a Vocation”, PW 364-5. See also *ibid.*, 355; Scaff 91-2.

<sup>166</sup> David Beetham, *Max Weber and the Theory of Modern Politics* (Polity, 1985), 42.

<sup>167</sup> “The Nation State and Economic Policy”, PW 27.

<sup>168</sup> While Weber often used the term “ethics”, I here use the term “morality” to avoid the confusion that arises when discussing the two “ethics” of responsibility and conviction.

<sup>169</sup> On Weber's conception of morality, see Wolfgang Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity: Culture and Conduct in the Theory of Max Weber*, trans. Neil Solomon (Stanford University Press, 1996), 53; Raymond Aron, *Essai sur la théorie de l'histoire dans l'Allemagne contemporaine* (J. Vrin, 1938), 266-7.

of life in that it involves the use of coercion; and this creates particular tensions with morality.<sup>170</sup> More broadly, political action by its nature is guided by *calculation of consequences*, which involved viewing (as well as treating) other humans in instrumental terms.<sup>171</sup> This did not mean that politics was a realm of “moral indifference”. To the contrary, the particular means of politics were linked to a set of distinctively *political* ethical demands and standards. The “ethical orientation” appropriate to politics involved “the weighing of ends and means, and responsible reflection on whether the desired end is valuable enough to ‘sanctify’ the means and compensate for the undesirable secondary effects” which were always involved in the use of violence or coercion. This ideal of “‘character’ in the purely political sense of the word” had “nothing to do with private morality”.<sup>172</sup>

Weber's defense of the autonomy of politics was directed against “pan-moralism” – the denial of differences or conflict between ethics and other realms of life.<sup>173</sup> Pan-moralism is anti-political, insofar as it 1) rules out political action, since the demands of morality are incompatible with the characteristic means of politics; and 2) devalues the proper aims and standards of politics: the promotion of the historically contingent, but humanly vital, values of “culture”.<sup>174</sup> “[A]ll of the highest cultural values are ... guilt-laden”, because they depend upon

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<sup>170</sup> See Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (University of California Press, 1978), (cited as E&S), 903; “Politics as a Vocation”, PW 310, 316, 357, 360.

<sup>171</sup> Aron op.cit., .

<sup>172</sup> “Parliament and Government”, PW 205; Marianne Weber, 683. See also “Constitutional Democracy in Russia”, PW 42; “Between Two Laws”, PW 76, 78.

<sup>173</sup> See e. g. “Constitutional Democracy in Russia”, PW 42; for commentary, Schluchter op. cit., 56. Pan-moralism may rest on either 1) a denial of the validity of any considerations other than ethical idealism, or 2) a denial of the gap or discontinuity between acting in conformity to ethical principles, and serving other values.

<sup>174</sup> See Weber, “The Nation State and Economic Policy” PW 14-28.



ways of life which, involving discipline, subordination, and inequality, are incompatible with a stringent ethic of brotherly love.<sup>175</sup> Both politics and morality had their own “dignity”.<sup>176</sup> But to strictly adhere to the standards appropriate to the realm of morality *while engaged in politics* betrayed a dangerous self-regard. It also constituted a sort of moral “free-riding”: for the maintenance of certain public conditions of freedom and security – which may require compromise and coercion – is itself a condition for the possibility of moral virtue.<sup>177</sup>

Weber was also concerned with the *ethical deformity* of “pan-moralism”. As he wrote (using the terms “ethics” and “moral” in a way opposite to the usage here), “ethics can appear in a morally quite calamitous role” when appeal to “ethics” serves as a “means of ‘being in the right’”, “legitimizing” one’s actions by finding (spurious) “reasons” that justify one in doing things that harm or burden others. This promotes an “ignoble self-righteousness”.<sup>178</sup> Weber’s criticism of “pan-moralism” was thus itself inspired by a commitment to a conception of honorable conduct.

Weber, in short, distinguished the means and purposes of politics from those of morality, and attacked the application of “moral” standards in politics as representing a failing of normative reasoning and personal character.<sup>179</sup> In doing so, he articulated a “realist” ethic which

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<sup>175</sup> Marianne Weber, 324. See also “Religious Rejections of the World”, FMW 354-5.

<sup>176</sup> “Religious Rejections of the World”, 334; “Science as a Vocation”, FMW 148.

<sup>177</sup> Cf. Dana Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 188, 223.

<sup>178</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, PW 355-6, 357.

<sup>179</sup> Weber’s “realist” critique of pan-moralism was not tantamount to drawing a demarcation between private and public morality. Life would be much easier if there were one set of values that applied to private life, and another that applied to public life. But the demands of morality apply to all aspects of life – which is why it properly comes into *conflict* with other values (see e. g. “Ethical Neutrality”, 15-16; cf. Aron, *German Sociology* 87; Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 287n.54). And morality had its perils in private life as well. “Demanding renunciation”, strictly moral values “can make *small* those who have become caught up in guilt.

would influence anti-liberal thinkers and find echoes in the thought and practice of anti-liberal activists. The ethical rejection of “pan-moralism”, and articulation of an ethical alternative oriented around notions of personal responsibility, sobriety, and honor or chivalry would also, however, be a resource on which later liberal thought would draw.

The position outlined above is ambiguous between a thorough-going pluralism which asserted the difference between, while recognizing the claims of, politics and morality; and a “realism” which asserted the primacy of political values. Weber sometimes embraced the latter position; thus he asserted that the “political power-interests of our nation” should be placed “above *all* other considerations”.<sup>180</sup> This view of the ultimate goals or values of politics was joined to an ethos of toughness, reflecting the view that “Politics is a hard business, and he who wants to be helmsman of the fatherland’s political development, must have steady nerves and must not be too sentimental ... He must above all be free of illusion and recognize the one fundamental fact: the unavoidable struggle of man against man on this earth.”<sup>181</sup>

Yet despite such statements, Weber was not a simple adherent of *realpolitik*. He rejected the idea that morality and politics “have nothing at all to do with one another”,<sup>182</sup> warning his more unscrupulous countrymen that, while “politics is not an ethical business”, there

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And they can lead to irresolvable conflicts in those cases where action without guilt is impossible” (Quoted Schluchter, 283n.40). Such mature reflections echoed the younger Weber's counsel to his morally earnest cousins that they should overcome their moral absolutism so as to find workable solutions to complicated personal problems: “The matter does not appear to me to be so desperate if one does not ask too exclusively ... ‘Who is morally right and who is morally wrong?’”, but rather asks “‘Given the existing conflict, how can I solve it with the least internal and external damage for all concerned?’” (Quoted Gerth and Mills, “Introduction”, FMW 9).

<sup>180</sup> “The Nation State and Economic Policy”, PW 14, 16-17, 20-21 (emphasis added).

<sup>181</sup> Weber quoted Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 278n.17.

<sup>182</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, PW 357.

nevertheless existed “a certain minimum of shame and obligation to behave decently which cannot be violated with impunity, even in politics;”<sup>183</sup> The proper norm or goal of politics was the service of certain values, and not mere success; and notions of “decency” or “honor” could not be reduced to or identified with the conquest of power – or, indeed, the achievement of whatever political outcome one sought. How one conducted oneself toward others mattered.

Weber was not fastidious. He did not shy away from violence: his enthusiasm for the German war effort in 1914 shocked his left-wing friends. But he was a sharp critic of the foolishness *and* dishonor of Germany's submarine warfare and its annexations in the East.<sup>184</sup> As Germany threatened to collapse into civil war following military defeat, Weber condemned resort to violent methods as “sterile”, and urged political leaders faced with violent upheaval to keep “a cool head and their nerve”, adding that, if compelled to “suppress violence with violence”, they must hasten to restore “the *guarantee of civil liberty* immediately.”<sup>185</sup> Weber even had respect for the use of non-violent protest methods – noting that, in Russia prior to the Revolution of 1905, “the tactic recommended by the liberals has quite often been effective, namely to face the troops unarmed rather than provoke them into fighting by the use of bombs and armed resistance” (though he added that “this would have its limitations in dealing with a determined military leadership”).<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> “Suffrage and Democracy”, PW 83. Weber also criticized a “realistic” interpretation of human motivation, which attributed human action to the will to power and material interest. Such a view could be a false guide to human behavior – *especially* political conduct, in which people are motivated by sentiments of honor and solidarity, and in which they seek not just material, but “ideal things” (“Socialism”, PW 275).

<sup>184</sup> For Weber's views on the war effort, see Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics, 1890-1920*, trans Michael Steinberg (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 190-244.

<sup>185</sup> “Parliament and Government”, 232.

<sup>186</sup> “Constitutional Democracy in Russia”, PW 60. See also *ibid.*, 65.

Weber's dissent from *realpolitik* was most apparent – and sharpest – in relation to the ethos of *realpolitik*. Weber attacked three interlaced elements of this ethos, as it flourished in Wilhelmine Germany: 1) a general attitude of cynicism and brutality, which sneered at ethical scruples and complacently relished domination; 2) worship of *success* as a mark of merit; and 3) a chauvinistic or jingoistic form of nationalism.

As a young man, Weber condemned the pervasive “worship of ruthlessness militaristic and otherwise, the culture of so-called realism, and a philistine contempt for all those who hope to attain their ends without appeal to the evil qualities of men, in particular, brutality.”<sup>187</sup> In 1887 he identified “Realpolitik” with worship of *success*, as well as with a (to him unbearable) “boorish self-conceit” and a “singular crudity of judgment toward all 'nonopportunistic' views”.<sup>188</sup> Nearly two decades later he attacked the “'sated' type of German who cannot bear not to be on the side of the 'winning cause' (whichever it may be), his mind elated and his chest puffed up with his qualities as a practitioner of Realpolitik.”<sup>189</sup> Weber returned to the theme another decade on, inserting it into one of his classic statements on the philosophy of the social sciences: “On the whole, people are strongly inclined to adapt themselves to what promises success, not only — as is self-evident — with respect to the means or to the extent that they seek to realize their ideals, but even to the extent of giving up these very ideals. In Germany this

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<sup>187</sup> Marianne Weber, 120; cf. Karl Jaspers, *Three Essays: Leonardo, Descartes, Max Weber*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 196-7; Raymond Aron, *German Sociology*, trans. Mary and Thomas Bottomore (Free Press, 1957), 90.

<sup>188</sup> Marianne Weber, 120.

<sup>189</sup> “Constitutional Democracy in Russia”, PW 60.

mode of behavior is glorified by the name Realpolitik.”<sup>190</sup> And at the end of his life, he was still attacking this same ethic of success – now for its failure to recognize the “tragedy in which all action”, particularly political action, is “enmeshed”.<sup>191</sup> He complained not only of the “shortsightedness” of Germany’s wartime leaders, but of “the lack of dignity on the part of the Kaiser, and the thoughtlessness of the dilettante government”; he courted controversy in publicly contesting the “shallow” nationalism of the “party of prestige” (or “the party of vanity”), with their “policy of aplomb”, and their recklessly “fulsome promises” of total victory, which made it impossible to conduct a realistic war effort, and fostered false hopes among the German people.<sup>192</sup>

Weber is known for his warnings against the dangers of the “ethic of conviction” (*Gesinnungsethik*), with its prioritization of the purity of intention and fidelity to absolute standards of right on the part of the agent, over and against the consequences of the agent's actions. But he also maintained that actions should be judged “not merely by their success-value [*Erfolgswert*] but by their convictional-value [*Gesinnungswert*] as well”.<sup>193</sup> The pursuit of power for its own sake was an expression of *vanity*, the bedeviling sin of Wilhelmine Germany.<sup>194</sup> True “realism” required that vanity be tamed, passion disciplined, and the besetting conformity and cowardliness of the *Ordnungsmensch* overcome; while “idealism” was “a highly desirable

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<sup>190</sup> “Ethical Neutrality”, 23, 25.

<sup>191</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, PW 354-5.

<sup>192</sup> Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *The Age of Bureaucracy: Perspectives on the Political Sociology of Max Weber* (Blackwell, 1974), 33, 40-41; Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 12, 17; Jaspers, *Three Essays*, 203; Marianne Weber, 630, 633, 689.

<sup>193</sup> “The Meaning of ‘Ethical Neutrality’”, in Shils and Finch op.cit., 24 (translation emended).

<sup>194</sup> Cf. Kim op.cit., 147; Regina Titunik, “Status, Vanity and Equal Dignity in Max Weber's Political Thought”, *Economy and Society*, 24:1 (1995), 101-21.

element in party life,” and one on the preservation of which Germany's political health depended.<sup>195</sup> Success was not the only political value: “Not for reasons of political expediency, but only in the name of *conscience* does a man have the right to oppose the conscientiously held different beliefs of others.”<sup>196</sup> This champion of “realism” even went so far as to express the hope that his nation would do “what is honest and *therefore* politically right.”<sup>197</sup>

Such sentiments gave Weber a certain sympathy for idealistic radicals – but not for their more moderate, muddled comrades. He lambasted the German Social Democrats for their “lack of dynamism and resolution” and “inability to decide” between the mutually exclusive courses open to them: a constructive reformist policy (which would require collaboration with other parties and classes), or a genuine revolutionary struggle. Such indecision led to impotence – “These gentlemen don’t frighten anyone anymore.” Compounding matters, the Social Democrats responded to their self-inflicted impotence with a “mixture of self-pity and utopian expectation”. Their radical posturing prevented them from seeing that they had, in effect, embraced a policy of “quietism”, based on an unfounded faith that eventual victory was guaranteed by the objective historical process. The leaders of the SPD were thus acting *irresponsibly*, in shuffling-off responsibility onto impersonal forces; and *ignobly*, in equating (promised) success with rightness.<sup>198</sup> This critique would be echoed by Weber's younger friend Lukacs, whose revulsion

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<sup>195</sup> “Parliament and Government”, PW 216.

<sup>196</sup> Quoted Marianne Weber, 120.

<sup>197</sup> “The Russian Revolution and the Peace”, in Weber, *The Russian Revolutions*, trans and ed. Gordon C. Wells and Peter Baehr (Cornell University Press, 1995), 265. Elsewhere Weber argued for universal suffrage as “an elementary obligation of decency” (“Suffrage and Democracy”, 106).

<sup>198</sup> Quotes from Mommsen, *The Political and Social Theory of Max Weber* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 75-9. Cf. Idem., *The Age of Bureaucracy*, 54, 59; “Socialism”, PW 288-9.

from the muddles of social democracy would lead him to Bolshevism.

Weber's complex position in relation to the demands of political “realism” and “idealism” was connected to his ambivalence between a defense of liberalism and moderation, and a willingness to embrace political as well as intellectual extremes. Weber's passionate ambivalence between ethical integrity and political effectiveness, and between extremism and moderation, is encapsulated in his declaration in May 1919 that “To restore Germany to her old glory, I would ... ally myself with any power on earth, even with the devil incarnate”; but that “it is impossible to have politics in Germany as long as it is possible for madmen of the right and the left to peddle their madness”. Weber accordingly withdrew from political life, recommitting himself to an academic path in which an insistence on clarity and realism, and personal integrity and commitment to strict standards and values, were compatible and possible.<sup>199</sup> Yet this encounter with the “madmen of the right and the left” prompted him to produce one of the most striking discussions of the problem of political ethics that his century produced: his famous lecture “Politics as a Vocation”.

### ***B. The Purpose[s] and Character of “Politics as a Vocation”***

In “Politics as a Vocation”, Weber famously deals with “the real relationship between *ethics* and *politics*”<sup>200</sup> through a discussion of two models of *political ethic*: the ethic of responsibility, and the ethic of conviction. On a conventional view, this involves a distinction between “an ethic in which deontological requirements reign supreme”, and one which is

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<sup>199</sup> Quoted Marianne Weber 673, and Mommsen, *Political and Social Theory*, 7.

<sup>200</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, PW 357; see also *ibid* 309.

“equivalent to consequentialism.”<sup>201</sup> Such a view reflects Weber's own presentation of the two ethics as reduceable to two fundamentally opposed “ethical maxims”. Weber also identified each ethic with political tendencies: the ethic of “principled conviction” (or “pure will” or “conscience”) with “radical revolutionary political attitudes, particularly revolutionary ‘syndicalism’”; and the ethic of “responsibility for the predictable consequences of the action” with “*Realpolitik*”.<sup>202</sup>

However, as I explain further below, there are problems with identifying Weber's two ethics with types of *moral theory*. There is also a puzzle in Weber's linkage of a stringent deontic ethics not only to Tolstoyan pacifists, but to ruthless revolutionary movements, which were “hardly known at the time [1919] for their moral scruples”.<sup>203</sup> And the view of Weber as a simple proponent of the “ethic of responsibility” is problematic, given his acknowledgment of the validity of some manifestations of the ethic of conviction,<sup>204</sup> and his admiration for the absolutist idealism of the Russian radicals he knew in Heidelberg.<sup>205</sup>

Our understanding of “Politics as a Vocation” is advanced if we recognize that the work is directed at once toward *diagnostic*, *normative*, and *therapeutic* goals.<sup>206</sup> The “diagnostic”

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<sup>201</sup> Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 144.

<sup>202</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, PW 359-60; cf. “Ethical Neutrality”, 15-16.

<sup>203</sup> Nick O'Donovan, “Causes and Consequences: Responsibility in the Political Thought of Max Weber”, *Polity* 43 (2011), 86-7.

<sup>204</sup> See “Politics as a Vocation”, 367-8.

<sup>205</sup> See Paul Honigsheim, *The Unknown Max Weber*, ed. Alan Sica (Transaction, 2000), 11, 71, 101, 108, 132, 135, 139, 206. As Honigsheim – an intimate of Weber's in Heidelberg – makes clear, Weber's attitude toward Russian revolutionary exiles involved a mixture of admiration for their integrity, a liberal commitment to tolerance and protection of persecuted minorities, and a sense of personal chivalry which led him to come to their aid.

<sup>206</sup> Cf. Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 50.



questions with which Weber is concerned are also *ethical* ones: what does it mean to adopt politics as a profession, or vocation? What sort of character – including both personal dispositions, and ways of conceiving of the activity of politics itself and one's relation to it – does politics demand?<sup>207</sup> What can one expect, or hope for, from a life devoted to politics? This last points to questions about the prospects and perils of political life in the immediate context in which Weber is speaking: What will *become* of the inner characters of those who take part in political (or revolutionary) struggle? And what are the possibilities, both for responsible political action, and liberal institutions, in a “disenchanted” world marked by crises of liberal institutions and principles in the face of mass democracy, and of the individual self in the face of mass society?<sup>208</sup>

Influenced by neo-Kantian philosophy, Weber was also concerned with a more basic *normative* question: *what could justify* the use of force in pursuit of power that is necessarily part of politics? Weber's answer is far from clear; but it seems to be bound up with the quality of character of the politician. Only those who live up to the challenges of politics in their inward character have the “right” to “seize the spokes of the wheel of history”.<sup>209</sup> Weber's diagnostic and normative objectives thus converged in a concern with the formation of *character* or *personality*, and particularly with the distinctive character-type of the individual with a *vocation* for politics. The politician with a “calling” for politics lives *for* politics and makes politics the center, or justification, of his life; he imposes a demanding ethic of inward self-control to *form*

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<sup>207</sup> See e.g. “Politics as a Vocation”, 352.

<sup>208</sup> On the lecture's concerns as “ethical”, see “Politics as a Vocation”, PW 352; on the questions of the fate and possibilities of politics in the modern world, see *ibid*, 368; cf. Scaff 172; Mueller, *Contesting Democracy*, 9, 27.

<sup>209</sup> Weber, “Politics as a Vocation”, 352.

his character to meet the demands of politics.<sup>210</sup>

Because Weber is concerned with both the “psychological” question of the inward “fate” of those who enter into politics, and the “normative” question of what might justify a political life, his conceptual construction of two alternative “ethics” of politics also has a double meaning. In juxtaposing an “ethic of conviction” with an “ethic of responsibility”, Weber is distinguishing at once between “two *ways of holding to principles*”;<sup>211</sup> and between two ways of *evaluating or justifying* an action (in terms of its consequences, and in terms of the actor's state of mind).

*Therapeutically*, Weber sought to foster self-reflection, dampen enthusiasm, dispel revolutionary “intoxication” and romantic illusions, distance the audience from their desires, and force them to face hard realities. All of this was toward the end of fortifying the idealists among his auditors against disillusionment and despair in the “polar night of icy darkness and hardness” that Weber foresaw, to protect them against the tendency either to become cynical and embittered, or to engage in a “mystical flight” from the world.<sup>212</sup> He may also have been performing a therapeutic exercise on *himself*: seeking to curb his own impulses toward radicalism.

These “therapeutic” aims were linked to a further function of the lecture: an *exemplary* one. Weber had earlier written that a lecture – as opposed to a political speech, which seeks to

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<sup>210</sup> See Peter Breiner, *Max Weber & Democratic Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1996), 151-2; Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 37-8; Harvey Goldman, *Max Weber and Thomas Mann: Calling and the Shaping of Self* (University of California Press, 1991), *passim* (especially 49, 168).

<sup>211</sup> Beetham 174, emphasis added.

<sup>212</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 368. Cf Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 8; Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, 216, 228-9; Strong, *Politics Without Vision*, 133.

whip up passions – should be marked by a scholarly<sup>213</sup> spirit of “calm rigor, matter-of-factness and sobriety”.<sup>214</sup> In “Politics as a Vocation” Weber both conforms to, and subverts, his earlier distinction. His dry, deflationary opening and general tone of noble stoicism exemplifies the ethos and tone of scholarship. Yet Weber *does* address politics – and furthermore, pronounces judgment on political movements and leaders. Speaking *as* a scholar, and *to* a student audience, he is also speaking *from* a public platform, not in a classroom. Weber's performance here both highlights the tensions between scholarship and politics, *and* suggests a measure of commonality: political action need not be (indeed, must not be) wholly devoid of the virtues of “rigor, matter-of-factness, and sobriety”. At the same time, the lecture's existence is premised on the *hope* that a politics marked by such a spirit may not be impotent in the face of political passion.

### **C. Weber Among the Militants: The Context and Argument of “Politics as a Vocation”**

Weber's therapeutic agenda reflected the circumstances of the lecture's composition and delivery. While much of the basic *ethical* argument of “Politics as a Vocation” had appeared in Weber's analysis of the 1905 Russian Revolution (1906), and his essay “Between Two Laws” (1916), the lecture's emphasis and tone reflects the immediate context in which it was given: “the collapse of Germany, Russian bolshevism, the chiliastic excitement of youth.” In this context, the younger generation “felt called upon to build a new world and hoped to succeed in establishing, with pure motives, an unprecedented social order ... filled with ethical and religious ideals of justice and brotherhood.” These young idealists longed for “a simpler

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<sup>213</sup> Here and throughout I use “scholarship” and its cognates in place of “science” [*Wissenschaft*], so as to better convey the broader sense of the German term in English.

<sup>214</sup> “Ethical Neutrality”, 4.

existence, a new community, and a new faith ... a new world of supernational union in which peace, brotherhood, solidarity and socialism would finally reign”.<sup>215</sup>

Weber's decision to accept an invitation to speak on “Politics as a Vocation” from the Free Students' Union (*Freistudentische Bund*, or FSB) at Munich University was a response to these circumstances. Initially reluctant, Weber only agreed to speak upon learning that the FSB was considering inviting Kurt Eisner, a socialist journalist and leader of the revolution that had overthrown the monarchy in Bavaria in November 1918. Eisner typified much that Weber feared and detested – the “littérateur” playing at politics, the irresponsible wielder of “charismatic” authority carried away (and carrying others away) by impassioned but empty rhetoric.<sup>216</sup> Weber's evaluation of Eisner was characteristic in its focus on personal character and contempt for “irresponsibility”; it excluded respect for Eisner's considerable personal courage, while correctly anticipating his political haplessness. By the time Weber delivered his lecture,<sup>217</sup> Eisner's party had suffered electoral defeat by the conservative Bavarian People's Party. Eisner would be assassinated a month later, on February 21; this precipitated the violent establishment of the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic (April-May 1919).<sup>218</sup>

Not only the occasion, but the audience, of Weber's lecture is significant. The FSB was a left-leaning organization, which advocated academic freedom and an autonomous, united,

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<sup>215</sup> Marianne Weber, 682, 598.

<sup>216</sup> Mueller, *Contesting Democracy*, 8; Wolfgang Schluchter and Guenther Roth, *Max Weber's Vision of History: Ethics and Methods* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), 113.

<sup>217</sup> Most scholars agree that Weber delivered his lecture in the last week of January 1919; it is however possible that the lecture was delivered later, in February or March. See Schluchter and Roth, 114-16.

<sup>218</sup> The violence to come would have been anticipated by Weber and his audience: Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht had been murdered (by right-wing paramilitaries acting at the behest of the social-democratic government) weeks before Weber gave his lecture. Weber was unsympathetic to the Spartacist leaders' fate, remarking that Liebknecht had “called upon the mob to fight, and the mob killed him.” (Marianne Weber, 642).

politically heterogeneous and academically (rather than ideologically)-focused student body. Weber sympathized with all of this, but was disturbed by the increasing influence of pacifism in the FSB. His lecture was accordingly crafted as a warning against the errors of political extremism – and particularly the moral absolutism of pacifism.<sup>219</sup> The one individual singled-out as representative of the “ethic of conviction” is the pacifist F. W. Foerster (a man of “undoubted integrity”, but a poor politician).<sup>220</sup> But Weber was also concerned with those like Eisner who preached “the *Realpolitik* of idealism”, which (incoherently) advocated *both* pacifism and revolution – and ardently insisted that there was no contradiction between ideal and deed, personal fulfillment and the work of politics. For Weber, such views represented the folly and ethical failure of *political romanticism*. The desire to understand the sources of different forms of political romanticism, and explain to himself and others what was wrong with these tendencies, formed the impulse behind the concluding argument of “Politics as a Vocation” – and much of Weber's studies of rejections of the world.

Weber observed, and fought, the influence of such political romanticism during the conference of Germany intellectuals held at Burg Lauenstein in May 1917. Initially, Weber's primary concern was to defend “democratic individualism” against the romantic nationalism and authoritarianism of right-wing “Pan-Germanism”. This led many of the more left-wing participants to look to Weber for leadership: “The youth fasten on to Max Weber, drawn by his personality and intellectual integrity. He hates all romanticism concerning the state, he attacks

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<sup>219</sup> Marianne Weber, 628; Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 25-7. Surprisingly, Weber associated pacifism with the “ethic of success” that he had identified in jingoism: he accused the pacifists of “wallowing voluptuously in sentiments of guilt, 'as if *success* in war were a divine judgment, as though it intrinsically proved anything” (Jaspers 204).

<sup>220</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 362. Foerster would later be an outspoken opponent of the Nazis.

[Max] Maurenbrecher<sup>221</sup> and all those university professors who cannot see reality for their own fancies ... Using words which put his freedom and life in danger, he reveals the deficiencies of the Reich.”<sup>222</sup> A group of young leftists sought Weber’s approval for “a proclamation which called, among other things, for the rule of Eros in the world and for the abolition of poverty. Weber was aghast at this confused and unrealistic program”. It was not just the “romanticism of the state”, but *all* romanticism about politics that Weber rejected. But while “impatient” with their naiveté, Weber “empathize[d]” with the young leftists, and sought to foster in them greater “clarity” and “objectivity”, as against the “gabbing and sensationalism” into which he saw them falling.<sup>223</sup> This concern expressed itself in some harsh words, both at the conference and in print – where Weber lambasted the “amateurish pipe-dreams” (or “romantic fantasies”), “blissful ignorance”, impatience and naiveté of “politically infantile” “prolix ideologues” and “littérateurs” on both the left and right.<sup>224</sup> Not surprisingly, this lost Weber much of the support he had initially inspired: the organizer of the conference later complained to Weber that “you were the representative of a critical-intellectual type who seeks by force of personality to dominate the free-play of individual powers and says to the world at large: do as I do, if you are up to it.”<sup>225</sup> These words aptly sum up Weber’s stance in “Politics as a Vocation”.

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<sup>221</sup> Once a member, with Weber, of Pastor Naumann’s National-Social Association, Maurenbrecher had by 1917 moved first to the left, and then to the right, joining the German Fatherland Party (many of whose members would later join the Nazis) and then the German National People’s Party (which would join in Hitler’s government in 1933); he was a leading publicist for the nationalist, imperialist, Pan-German League (of which Weber, too, had been a member in the 1890s).

<sup>222</sup> Ernst Toller, *Ein Jugend in Deutschland* (1933), quoted Dittmar Dahlmann, “Max Weber’s Relation to Anarchism and Anarchists: The Case of Ernst Toller”, in Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds., *Max Weber and his Contemporaries* (Unwin Hyman, 1989), 367-9.

<sup>223</sup> Marianne Weber, 598-9, 601.

<sup>224</sup> “Suffrage and Democracy”, PW 88-90, 100, 104).

<sup>225</sup> Eugen Diederichs to Weber, 22 June 1917, quoted in Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction*,

One of the young idealists at Lauenstein whom Weber failed to dissuade was Ernst Toller. It is plausible to see Toller as one inspiration for, and addressee of, “Politics as a Vocation”.<sup>226</sup> Weber’s attitude toward Toller reflected the older man’s respect for idealism, and his sense of chivalry. When participants at a political meeting in Berlin in December 1918 sought to silence Toller for his radical statements, Weber stepped onto the rostrum, and, protectively laying his hand on the diminutive Toller’s shoulder, called on the crowd to “Let him speak. He is a man to be taken seriously. He has something to say.”<sup>227</sup> After the collapse of the Bavarian Soviet Republic, Weber would testify in court that Toller was a man of “entirely upright character” who had allowed himself to be “emotionally carried away beyond his original intention.” The testimony helped to save Toller from execution. But Weber also regarded Toller as a good example of the dangers of an “unworldly” *Gesinnungsethiker* [one guided by an ethic of conviction] who entered into a political role for which he was not suited: “God in his anger”, Weber remarked, “has made [Toller] a politician.”<sup>228</sup>

Toller, Eisner and their comrades were (according to the taxonomy presented in the previous chapter) “utopians”, dedicated to a project of immediate *moral transformation* through *exemplary* action. This reflected a belief that morally good ends could be achieved through the

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trans Keith Tribe (Allen and Unwin, 1988), 214 n.23. See also Joshua Derman, *Max Weber in Politics and Social Thought: From Charisma to Canonization* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 22-3.

<sup>226</sup> Schluchter, *Max Weber’s Vision of History*, 115-16; Daniel Bell identifies Toller as one of those Weber had in mind in writing the peroration to “Politics as a Vocation”. Bell, “First Loves and Early Sorrows”, *Partisan Review* 48:4 (1981), 538-49.

<sup>227</sup> Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics*, 47.

<sup>228</sup> Weber quoted Marianne Weber, 661; Dahlmann, 374.

inward perfection of individual character.<sup>229</sup> As politicians of conviction, they felt “‘responsible’ only for ensuring that the flame of pure conviction ... is never extinguished. To kindle that flame again and again” was the primary purpose of their actions.<sup>230</sup>

The ethicist of conviction is not *wrong* about the exemplary value of actions, or the importance of consistency and fidelity to principles. But few conviction-politicians accepted the full implications of their commitments. This reflected a crucial feature of the larger outlook underlying the ethic of conviction: a “cosmic-ethical rationalism” which rejected the “ethical irrationality of the world” – the facts that morally good means may produce morally repugnant ends, while morally repugnant means may produce morally good ends; and that there can be tragic conflicts between genuine moral demands.<sup>231</sup> The idea that “only good can flow from good, only evil from evil” was disproven by “the entire course of world history”, as well as “any unbiased examination of daily experience”, which reveals that “the achievement of ‘good’ ends is in many cases tied to the necessity of employing morally suspect or at least morally dangerous means”; and that one must “reckon with the possibility or even likelihood of evil side-effects.”<sup>232</sup> The individual who presumes to engage in politics must acknowledge that “*If* you take such and such a stand, then ... you have to use such and such a *means* in order to carry out your conviction practically.” But, “perhaps these means are such that you believe you must reject

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<sup>229</sup> The Cultural and Political Federation of German Youth (led by Toller) declared that “We want to lead by example”; and sought “the harmony of body, soul and spirit.” Quoted Dahlmann, 370. See also *ibid.*, 373-4; Marianne Weber, 601.

<sup>230</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 358, 360; see also *ibid* 359 .

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 361; “Science as a Vocation”, FMW 147-8. See also Karl Lowith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, ed. Tom Bottomore and William Outhwaite (Routledge, 1993), 72; Kim 112-13.

<sup>232</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 360, 362, 364-5.



them. Then you simply must choose between the end and the inevitable means.”<sup>233</sup> No ethic in the world could “determine when and to what extent the ethically good end ‘sanctifies’ the ethically dangerous means and side-effects.” All that an ethics of politics could demand is that one be *clear-eyed* about the dangers.

This was a test that the “ethics of conviction” failed: for it was “bound to founder hopelessly on this problem of how the end is to sanctify the means”.<sup>234</sup> One had either to accept the demands of responsibility – and sacrifice personal purity; or to adhere to standards of moral purity – and acknowledge that, in doing so, one was renouncing the pursuit of power, and thus the ability to achieve morally urgent goals.

Such arguments make sense as responses to such political activists as Toller and Weber's syndicalist student Roberto Michels, both of whom appeared to Weber as fanatics – but not *ruthless* fanatics. Indeed, Weber's complaint was (in part) that such men were not ruthless *enough* to be fit for politics. Weber's critique makes less sense as a polemic against Bolshevism, which might be criticized as fanatical – but was certainly not oriented around the maintenance of personal moral purity or dedicated to the sovereignty of individual conscience. Such a misdescription or misjudgment of Bolshevism would be all the stranger in one who was an astute observer of Russian politics – and whose writings showed familiarity with (and qualified approval of) Trotsky's “realism”.<sup>235</sup>

This puzzle may simply arise from mis-identifying Weber's intended targets. The

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 360, 361.

<sup>235</sup> See e.g. “Politics as a Vocation”, 310.

seeming mismatch between Weber's critique of an ethic oriented toward the Sermon on the Mount, and a critique of revolutionary action, may be resolved if we understand the lecture as *primarily* directed, not against Bolshevism, but at more immediate German interlocutors who represented an ethics – and ethos – of idealism and purity: revolutionaries who really *were* “notable for their moral scruples.”

Yet this response is not fully satisfactory: for it both fails to make sense of why Weber did link his critique of the “ethic of conviction” to a more ruthless type of revolutionary politics; and sidelines the critique he did offer of Bolshevism – a critique which would influence later liberals. Weber noted that, while the ethic of conviction *logically should* “*reject any action which employs morally dangerous means*”, “in the real world ... we repeatedly see the proponent of the ‘ethics of conviction’ suddenly turning into a chiliastic prophet. Those who have been preaching ‘love against force’ one minute ... issue a call to force the next; they call for one *last* act of force to create the situation in which *all* violence will have been destroyed for ever.”<sup>236</sup> This was because the impulse toward moral *perfection* could have two expressions in politics: “‘holy’ self-abnegation”, which meant flight from politics into a realm of pure, self-abnegating love; or a “fight” to *fully* realize morality through political struggle.<sup>237</sup> When he gave his lecture Weber could not be sure to what means young radicals like Toller might resort; but he could foresee them embracing violence, even if they did not do so with the remorselessness of the Bolsheviks.

Weber's concern was, indeed, partly with the way in which a certain sort of moral scrupulousness could be transformed, in the face of increasingly polarized and high-stakes political struggle, into an embrace of violence that was far more ruthless than that of exponents

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>237</sup> “Constitutional Democracy in Russia”, PW 42; see also Schluchter 55-6; Marianne Weber, 322.

of conventional “power politics” – because it saw itself as doing the Lord's (or History's, or Morality's) work. One of the most vital suggestions of Weber's lecture – all too often missed in more simplistic readings – is that moral purism and 'end-maximalist' or 'Jacobin' political ruthlessness are closely connected in their underlying psychological impulses and ethical presuppositions.

Weber's suggestion that the “pan-moralistic” impulse could lead both to a self-abnegating moral purism, and a ruthless devotion to political struggle, drew on a more fully elaborated argument presented in his analysis of “religious rejections of the world” (1915). These “rejections”, on Weber's account, represented different strategies for fleeing from the “ethical irrationality of the world”. One strategy was that of “mysticism” (or, in our terms, purism), which counseled complete withdrawal from the corruption of the world, and embrace of an ethos of “acosmic love”. Another, rival strategy, was “asceticism”, which sought to *work on*, to *master* and *transform* the world in the service of higher values.<sup>238</sup> While both of these strategies tended to foster political quietism, each could take a “revolutionary turn” when the necessity of coercion was regarded, not as a permanent feature of creaturely life, but as something that could be *escaped*. Political asceticism posits “an obligation to crusade” – a moral duty to transform the world so as to realize the demands of moral law. Mysticism, politically radicalized takes the form of “eschatological expectations”: the political mystic comes to believe that a social (not merely personal) moral transformation is imminent, and seeks to hasten it through political action. Such action does not aim at rational mastery (as the political ascetic's actions do), but fostering a spirit of inner moral purity among the spiritual elect – who now are seen as a

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<sup>238</sup> See “Religious Rejections of the World”, FMW, particularly 325-6, 336, 339.

potential political elite as well.<sup>239</sup>

Both of these revolutionary ethics involve a conviction of the necessity of moral transformation of the world, and both presuppose that the believer has been vouchsafed the truth of “the one thing needful”. Both are absolutist; and both may be identified with the “ethic of conviction”. While both may have a certain integrity as religious ethics, they fail as political ethics, foundering on the “everlasting tension” that exists between “the world” and “salvation”.<sup>240</sup> To hope for salvation through activity in the world (as the “ascetic” does), or to hope that the world will be transformed through the power of personal exemplification so as to be made hospitable to salvation (as the mystic does), is self-deception.

Pacifism and Tolstoyan anarchism were pure cases of political “mysticism”; syndicalism – and the anarchism of some of the leaders in the Bavarian Soviet Republic – exhibited both mystical and ascetic tendencies. Bolshevism was an expression of radical political asceticism, which sought to transform the world through mastery. Notwithstanding its apparent realism, Bolshevism failed to adequately grapple with the challenges of this task. This failure was *ethical*, in two senses.<sup>241</sup> First, Bolshevik thought and action failed to recognize the gulfs, both between the ends they claimed to pursue and the ends they realistically *could* achieve; and between the *means* they used and the ends they invoked.<sup>242</sup> The Bolsheviks were right to recognize that morally pure means would not necessarily produce morally good ends; but they failed to recognize the extent to which adopting the ruthless means of revolution would make it

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.; cf. Scaff, 173.

<sup>241</sup> As explicated in the introduction.

<sup>242</sup> Cf. Weber’s discussion of the function of discussions of value-judgments in “Ethical Neutrality”, 21-2.

impossible to achieve the ultimate ends at which they aimed. The course adopted by the Bolsheviks failed to meet the requirements *either* of an ethic of conviction – for they failed to abide by their own announced values and principles; *or* an ethic of responsibility – for they had produced results that did not serve, but undermined, their cause. Second, Bolshevism reflected a failing not only of reasoning, but of *character*. Despite its veneer of hard-headed realism, Bolshevism revealed an impulse of political romanticism in its quasi-aesthetic penchant for extreme positions and grand gestures. The apparent realism exhibited by such Bolshevik leaders as Trotsky was, in Weber's eyes, mixed with “the typical vanity of the Russian littérateur”, a willingness to play with words and principles, and infatuation with grandiose goals.<sup>243</sup>

As this suggests, Weber saw in the radicalism of his day a conflation of politics not only with morality, but with aesthetics. The *aesthetic-ethical* outlook inspired a “politics oriented exclusively toward ultimate values, pure convictions, and 'last things'”. It was mistaken not only in seeking salvation along the path of politics, but in subjecting the question of the relation between means and ends, and between politics and morality, to *aesthetic* criteria.<sup>244</sup> This was doubly erroneous and pernicious: first in confusing ethical and aesthetic criteria, and second in identifying the combination thereof as the criterion for politics.

Both “pan-moralistic” and aesthetic impulses fed into the ethos of political romanticism. This ethos was comprised of, first, “utopian” (that is, unrealistic) estimations of the possibilities of political achievement, and the harmony between politics and morality;<sup>245</sup> second, a *taste* for

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<sup>243</sup> “Socialism”, PW 299-300.

<sup>244</sup> Scaff, op. cit., 175.

<sup>245</sup> Thus Weber wrote that “All ideas aiming at abolishing the dominance of men over men are 'Utopian’” (Weber to Michels, 1908, quoted Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics*, 392).

drastic and dramatic political action (the general strike, revolutionary communism); and third, an ethical ideal which placed a premium on integrity and purity as qualities of personal character. The besetting vice of political romanticism, in Weber's eyes, was that it tended to replace "economic and political thought and action" with a "hysterical enjoyment of emotion". The raising of the satisfactions of the grand gesture and adherence to radical, consistent doctrines unmuddled by concrete political considerations made it "extremely easy to leap" from radicalism "into the authoritarian and reactionary camp", when the positions staked out by this camp proved to offer more certainty and emotional release than moderate liberalism.<sup>246</sup>

The appeal of political romanticism was not purely moral or aesthetic. It was also connected to the intoxication with power which marked political actors generally: had they not desired power on some level, political romantics would not have become *political* at all.<sup>247</sup> Not only idealists, but those marked by a "pragmatic rationalism", tended to long to "'act' in the service of some absolute social-ethical norm" – and therefore also tended to fall prey to "romanticism".<sup>248</sup> There was just such an admixture of personal lust for power in Trotsky's romanticism – and, Weber suspected, in Eisner's and other German radicals as well.

Yet those attracted to political romanticism failed to *understand* the nature of the power for which they thirsted. The idealistic revolutionaries of his day had, in Weber's view, failed to

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<sup>246</sup> "Constitutional Democracy in Russia", 55-6, 71. Here Weber may once again have been reflecting on temptations that he himself faced; he also anticipated the trajectories of both Maurenbrecher and Michels, from the left to the far-right.

<sup>247</sup> In attacking the "purely emotional 'radicalism'" of Syndicalism, Weber wrote that "the *romanticism* of the general strike and the *romanticism* of the hope for revolution as such ... enchants these intellectuals", who hungered "after the great revolutionary miracle – and the opportunity of feeling that even they will be in power one day." ("Parliament and Government", PW 192, 231; "Socialism", *ibid* 298).

<sup>248</sup> "Constitutional Democracy in Russia", 55-6.

recognize the disconnect between their ends, and the very specific means of revolution. To be effective, a revolutionary movement would depend on the perfection of “technique”, and on an “iron steadfastness of nerves” (and, additionally, steely ideological conviction), such as that exhibited by the Bolsheviks.<sup>249</sup> Such techniques were necessary to successfully prosecute a revolution; but the only order that could result from employing these means in this spirit was a “rather ordinary military dictatorship” (which was what the Bolshevik regime quickly became).<sup>250</sup> Such an outcome could not justify the means used: the result would fall well short *by the standards invoked to justify it* – that is, the anti-militarist, emancipatory, egalitarian standards of socialism.<sup>251</sup>

Those in thrall to the ethic of personal purity and political aestheticism were also inclined to “sectarian small-mindedness”, which led them to focus their attacks, not on the ruthless forces of reaction, but on “the ‘rival’ bourgeois democratic parties.” Such a policy (identifiable, Weber believed, both among the left-wing of the German Social Democrats, and among their syndicalist, anarchist, and Spartacist rivals) “destroys all attempts to educate people in the ways of effective political action”, and allowed “the forces of reaction to gain the upper hand entirely”. It also immunized its adherents to self-questioning, allowing them to hold fast to their illusions while enjoying “the intoxicating thought that ‘the world is full of such dreadfully bad people’”.<sup>252</sup> Revolutionary political romanticism thus represented not only a failure of realism, but of *responsibility* to the values that political romantics claimed to serve.

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<sup>249</sup> Scaff 168, 180, 396.

<sup>250</sup> Mommsen, *Political and Social Theory*, 83-4.

<sup>251</sup> Breiner, *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*, 189. See also Marianne Weber, 627.

<sup>252</sup> “Constitutional Democracy in Russia”, 62-3.

Such reflections read prophetically, given the disastrous failure of the forces of the left to unite against Nazism in Weimar Germany. However, a somewhat similar dynamic could be seen among those “moderate” social democrats – whom Weber supported – whose horror and hatred of those further to the left of them led them to call upon the right-wing paramilitaries of the *Freikorps* in 1919.<sup>253</sup> It appears that Weber was correct to condemn the “congenital folly” of “*all* ideologically oriented politics *of any kind*”, including that of the center.<sup>254</sup> Weber’s writings may be most powerful as a critique of an *ideological* (or sectarian) *mindset*, from which their author was not always free, but which, at his best, he was better able to transcend than many of his contemporaries – or successors.

#### **D. Weber's “Ethic of Responsibility” as Ethos for Political Action**

“Politics as a Vocation” reflected not only Weber's immediate political concerns and ethical responses, but also a longstanding analytical preoccupation with the phenomenon of ethos – a preoccupation which is reflected in his best-known contribution to historical sociology, the analysis of the relationship of the “Protestant ethic” to the “spirit” of capitalism.

In order to both draw out the nature of Weber's concern with and understanding of ethos, and connect it to the concerns of this study, a certain amount of interpretive reconstruction is needed. Weber's terminological usage is somewhat confusing, insofar as he does not define and sustain a clear and consistent distinction between the idea of an “ethic” (*Ethik*), that of a “spirit” (*Geist*), and that of an ethos (*Ethos*). What Weber's discussion in *The Protestant Ethic* does make clear is that for Weber the term “ethic” indicates not merely a theory or prescription about

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<sup>253</sup> See Marianne Weber, 632-5.

<sup>254</sup> “Constitutional Democracy in Russia”, 65, emphasis added.



conduct; rather, an “ethic” is a feature of “the *complete disposition of the personality*”,<sup>255</sup> consisting of “practical impulses for action” and “psychological sanctions” which give direction to conduct. The *components* of an ethic may be distinguished as 1) a *belief-system* which fosters certain “attitudes toward the world” ; and 2) a *certain way of life*, consisting of *habits* and *goals*, and the development of a *character* suited to these habits and goals.<sup>256</sup> Both elements 1) and 2) are also important for Weber's account of the “spirit” of a way of life. Thus, what Weber terms the “spirit” (*Geist*) of capitalism consists in “the *ideal* of the honest man of recognized credit, and above all the idea of a *duty of the individual* toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself.” Weber's discussion also reveals the close connection between – if not the actual interchangeability – of the notion of an “ethic” of personal character and conduct, the “spirit” of a way of life, and the “ethos” that marks both individual conduct and larger societal ways of life. At the most, we may say that an ethic is more closely tied to a certain code of conduct, or set of rules, than a “spirit” or “ethos”; but even this distinction proves blurry in Weber's practice. Thus, Weber stresses that the *spirit* of capitalism is marked by a “a *peculiar ethic [eine eigentümliche “Ethik”]*”, the infraction of the *rules* of which is “treated not as foolishness but as forgetfulness of duty. That is the essence of the matter. It is not mere business astuteness, that sort of thing is common enough, it is an *ethos [Ethos]*, which manifests itself here. It is just this quality which interests us.”<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Weber, quoted Goldman, *Max Weber and Thomas Mann*, 164.

<sup>256</sup> *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [PE], trans. Talcott Parsons (1950 edition), 97; “The Social Psychology of the World Religions”, FMW 267-8, 280 (the essay ‘s title is better translated as ‘The Economic Ethics of the World Religions’’) For an illustration, see Weber's sketch of the way of life, habits and character constituting the “Protestant ethic”, PE 51-2..

<sup>257</sup> PE 51 (translation revised). At the same time, a particular ethic or ethos may be detached from the *doctrine* from which it first arose. Thus, while the ethics and ethos of Protestantism arose from a theological “body of ideas”,

Weber's decision to invoke two “ethics” should be understood in light of the conception of “ethic” advanced in his writings on the ethics of the world religions: as involving a particular sort of character and spirit, which encompassed (explicit) ways of thinking about values, tacit assumptions and judgments, emotive reactions, and deliberately cultivated habits and qualities of character. In other words, Weber's two “ethics” are best understood as matters of ethos, not of ethical *doctrine*.<sup>258</sup> We can, it is true, translate either ethic into a *theory* of moral value; but something is lost in the translation. This loss is particularly significant if we identify the “ethic of responsibility” with moral consequentialism. For the ethic of responsibility stresses the *relationship* between actor and action, rather than merely looking to outcomes. It places a premium on *integrity*; and recognizes that action that meets the standard of “responsibility” will often be unsuccessful, and that action that is both “responsible” and successful will still be “tragic” in involving violations of personal morality which *properly* leave regret.<sup>259</sup>

But what is this notion of responsibility, which bears so much weight in Weber's lecture? Weber used the term to invoke a number of different, not always obvious, ideas. Leaving aside the idea of *causal responsibility*, where being responsible means being the cause (necessary or sufficient, sole or partial, depending on the particular theory of causal responsibility in play), we may draw out two broad normative conceptions of responsibility in Weber's writings. Sometimes Weber appears to adopt what one might term an *object-oriented* conception of responsibility. This conception is object-oriented, both in being a matter of having responsibilities in relation to

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both the ethic and ethos were habituated in many who did not adhere to Puritan theology (see *ibid.*, 97).

<sup>258</sup> Cf. the discussion by Larry May, in *The Socially Responsive Self: Social Theory and Professional Ethics* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 88-9.

<sup>259</sup> Cf. Kim 114.

others. To *be* responsible, on this account, means upholding duties to act in certain ways for certain purposes. Responsibility is thus a feature of action. But responsibility can also be seen as a feature of an agent's character. On this *subject-related* view, we may speak of an agent not as responsible *to* any other individual(s), or *for* any particular action or outcome, but as simply being a “responsible person” – that is, as being the sort of person who is characteristically disposed to take responsibility, and to think and undertake action in a way that reflects and expresses a strong sense of responsibility (that is, to act in a *responsible manner*).

The most significant object-oriented conception of responsibility advanced in Weber's writings is that of responsibility to a *cause* (*Sache*). A sense of being responsible-to-a-cause protected against both mere opportunism born of avidity for power, and the “intoxication” of the ideologists whose devotion to their cause was detached from concern with its actual fate in the world. Both opportunism and fanaticism displayed the “two deadly sins of politics”: “lack of objectivity and irresponsibility”. Of course, a desire for power is a necessary motivation for anyone engaged in politics. The “sin against the holy spirit” of politics comes when politicians pursue power out of “purely personal self-intoxication”. If politics is to be more than a “frivolous intellectual game” or a base scramble for the validation of “success”, politicians must be motivated by a sense of *passion*. But mere passion is insufficient and dangerous; it must be transmuted into a sense of *calling*, a self-disciplined commitment to a *cause* which is far removed from the “sterile excitement” sought by political romantics. The politician who lives by an *ethic of responsibility* feels compelled to “take full responsibility” both for the fate that befalls the cause in political struggle, and for the costs demanded by the cause.<sup>260</sup> In being conscious of

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<sup>260</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 353-4; “Parliament and Democracy”, 161 (emphasis added).

his responsibilities to and for others, he cultivates a disposition of responsibility.

To cultivate a disposition of responsibility is to (strive to) make realistic *judgments* about the likelihood of a proposed course of action achieving the aims which (putatively) justify it. It also means *taking responsibility* for one's judgments or interpretations of reality, which includes acknowledging one's mistakes. For Weber, judgment was not a skill or acuteness of perception, but a “psychological quality”, the “ability to maintain one’s inner composure and calm” while being receptive to realities. This involves a quality of *distance* “from things and people” – including from *oneself*. A politician should be able to step back from his own commitments and ambitions, to see his own fate and cause within a broader perspective. Such “inner *distance* and *reserve* in a person's personal bearing” was crucial to a sense of reality, and the upholding of responsibility – as well as the “prerequisite for all personal dignity”.<sup>261</sup>

To sustain and live up to a sense of responsibility to a larger cause thus involves both attachment, and distance. The politician must be able to force “hot passion and cool judgment ... together in a single soul”. A sense of responsibility for what will become of one's cause provides a *motivational bridge* from the heat of commitment, to the exercise of that judgment which is necessary to serve the cause well. Thus passion, responsibility, and judgment, joined together and mutually serving and restraining one another, are the three qualities “pre-eminently decisive for a politician”.<sup>262</sup>

This stress on commitment to a cause being conditioned by a disposition of responsibility reflects Weber's view that what defines the politician with a “vocation” is the *mode* of his

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<sup>261</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 353; “Suffrage and Democracy”, 122. See also Mueller, *Contesting Democracy*, 42; Scaff, 165.

<sup>262</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 352-3.

devotion, the *way* in which he engages in politics – and the underlying dispositions and self-understanding that this reflects. Being responsible to a cause is an expression of a broader disposition to *be* responsible. This disposition consists in both maintaining a “*particular bearing towards* the result of action” - one marked by an “attitude of ownership”;<sup>263</sup> and cultivating certain qualities of character and habits. Among the latter is a practice of taking great care in attempting to foresee and control the consequences of one's actions (and to safeguard against possible negative consequences).<sup>264</sup> So too is a practice of taking *responsibility* for the consequences of one's actions – including taking the blame when one gets things wrong, as one sometimes will, no matter how conscientious one is, or how much virtue one possesses.

Such a disposition of responsibility was an antidote to the follies and vices that particularly bothered Weber in contemporary politics: recklessness, foolishness, self-righteousness. In “Politics as a Vocation” Weber is at his most scornful in noting how the exemplar of the ethic of conviction “holds the world, not the doer, responsible” if “evil consequences flow from an action done out of pure conviction”. This leads the politician of conviction to be irresponsible as a matter of *deliberation* and *decision* – to undertake courses of action without due consideration for their likely consequences; and to be irresponsible as a matter of *affect* or *relation to the world* – to not *feel* a sense of responsibility for the negative consequences of his actions. This encourages folly, and prevents learning from mistakes; it also fosters an intolerant, uncharitable attitude toward others. He who lives according to an ethic of responsibility, on the other hand, will “make allowances” for the shortcomings of others; he recognizes that he has “no right” to “presuppose goodness and perfection in human beings”, and

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<sup>263</sup> O'Donovan., 97, 104, emphasis added; Cf. Goldman, *Politics, Death and the Devil*, 181-2.

<sup>264</sup> Cf. O'Donovan 97, 105; Strong, *Politics without Vision*, 128.

“does not feel that he can shuffle off the consequences of his own action ... and place them on the shoulders of others. He will say, ‘These consequences are to be attributed to my actions’”; he will face up to his responsibility, and accept blame if appropriate. He is not concerned with always being seen to be in the right; he is concerned, however, to rightly judge his own actions by the ethical standard he has adopted.<sup>265</sup>

The ethic of responsibility was also linked to an approach to practical deliberation. As a number of interpreters have stressed, the ethics of responsibility and conviction are linked to Weber's “ideal types” of “purposive rationality” (*Zweckrationalität*) and “value rationality” (*Wertrationalität*).<sup>266</sup> “Value rationality” identifies goals as worth pursuing purely for their own sake, independent of success; the agent guided by value-rationality acts out of “conviction”, in accordance with unconditional laws or imperatives.<sup>267</sup> Value rationality thus clearly corresponds to the sort of judgment involved in the ethic of conviction; if a similar correspondence holds for purposive-rationality and the ethic of responsibility, what light can Weber's account of this mode of judgment throw on his conception of political ethics?

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<sup>265</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 360. At the same time, this disposition to take an attitude of ownership toward the results of action had, itself, to be tempered by “cool judgment”, lest the political actor arrive at erroneous judgments about her responsibility for certain outcomes, and come to feel a (crushing) sense of responsibility for failures or unanticipated consequences beyond her control. Weber's insistence on the impossibility of foreseeing and controlling all consequences of action – and his warnings against vanity, which can also express itself in an excessive estimation of one's own power and hence (causal) responsibility – point to such a tempering of the sense of responsibility-for-outcomes. But Weber did not stress this point, because he assumed that the tendency to deny responsibility for negative outcomes would generally be stronger, and more dangerous, than an excessively (even pathologically) elevated sense of responsibility. He also suggested that in some cases, holding positions of political (or military) power meant taking responsibility and bearing blame (or, “taking the fall”) for things that one knew oneself not to be causally responsible for (see e.g. the striking account of Weber's post-war debate with General Ludendorff in Marianne Weber, 651-4).

<sup>266</sup> See e.g. Breiner 169-71; Lowith, 46-7; O'Donovan rejects this view, based on an interpretation of *Zweckrationalität* which I dispute below. In order to make the meaning of *Zweckrationalität* clearer, I have chosen to translate it as “purposive rationality”, rather than the commonly-used (and misleading) translation of it as “instrumental rationality”.

<sup>267</sup> E&S 24-5

At first sight, it appears to commit Weber to a picture of politics as pure technique, insofar as purposive-rationality, on a common understanding, cannot establish which ends one should pursue, but can only determine the “appropriateness” of “certain available means” for achieving a given end. But Weber's conception of “purposive rationality” involves more than this: it also involves weighing “the end, the means, and the secondary results” of a given course of action, considering not only “alternative means to the end”, and the “relations of the end to the secondary consequences”, but also “the *relative importance of different possible ends*”. Such consideration allows agents to answer the question “what will the attainment of a desired end ‘cost’ in terms of the predictable loss of other values?” In “the vast majority of cases”, there are such “costs”; therefore “the weighing of the goal in terms of the incidental consequences of the action which realizes it cannot be omitted from the deliberation of persons who act with *a sense of responsibility*.” Such purposive-rationality makes it possible to “indirectly criticize” an actor's choice of end, as being either “meaningless” (because present conditions make its attainment predictably impossible) – or too costly to other values.<sup>268</sup> Purposive rationality thus guides decisions about *what* ends to pursue, as well as how to pursue them. Its difference from (and, Weber suggests, superiority to) value rationality rests in its ability to discern the potential conflicts between values, and the need to recognize trade-offs and make choices between them, which is a basic feature of modern ethical life.<sup>269</sup>

Insofar as it encompasses a “purposive-rational” orientation, the “ethic of responsibility” involves a careful comparative weighing of different considerations – and a recognition of the

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid. 26; “Objectivity”, 52-3 (italics added). See also see Honigsheim, 240; Lowith, 68.

<sup>269</sup> Cf. Aron, *German Sociology*, 83; Schluchter and Roth, *Max Weber's Vision of History*, 65–116; Breiner 41; and Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, xiii-xiv.

complex, often conflictual, relations between different values (both among different moral values, and between moral and non-moral values) in an ethically irrational world. It thus involves a “bridging principle of balance”, as opposed to the ethic of conviction's “bridging principle of hierarchy”, in which other values are subordinated to a primary ethical ideal, and practice is determined in relation to this ultimate ideal.<sup>270</sup> As a balancing principle, the ethic of responsibility does not *rule out* coming to the conclusion that commitment to principle should, in particular cases, be decisive. But it does reject both the monism and absolutism, and the hierarchical (and, in many cases, deductive) model of reasoning of “value rationality”.<sup>271</sup> On this reading, purposive-rationality discourages absolutism – *both* the (deontic) absolutism of purism about means, and the absolutism of ruthless consequentialism.

Weber's ethic of responsibility does not just call for a “balancing” approach. It insists that the balancing be done in a spirit of care and modesty; such a spirit is itself constituted by a balance between passion, responsibility (or conscientiousness), and (cool or objective) judgment, and between heroic and prosaic virtues. In this latter respect, Weber's thought displays a tension which continued to mark liberal thinking about the ethos of politics: an attraction – and, at the same time, an awareness of the potential dangers of too pure a form of – to *both* a “heroic” or “romantic” ethos of idealism, integrity, and honor; *and* a “prosaic”, “modest” or “realist” ethos of sobriety, matter-of-factness, prudence, flexibility, and moderation. Yet while tensions exist

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<sup>270</sup> Schluchter op. cit. 88-9, 94-5; cf. Mommsen, *Political and Social Theory*, 19-20. A “bridging principle”, as defined by Schluchter, is a principle which guides how an agent connects particular value-commitments to both 1) other value-commitments and 2) practical decisions.

<sup>271</sup> Cf. Schluchter op. cit., 95. Weber's commitment to this model of ethical reasoning can be traced back to his youth. To live *well*, the young Weber reflected, required acting in such a way that one incurred “the least possible losses of human dignity, of the ability to be good and to love, of the ability to fulfill obligation”; to do so often involved “difficult calculation”, which could not be reduced to or replaced by appeal to absolute principles. (Quoted Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 283n.40).



between these two types of *ethos*, Weber suggested they might in fact be closely connected.

Weber can be seen as offering a picture of and argument for a “new heroism”<sup>272</sup> of self-control, responsibility, and “heroic skepticism”,<sup>273</sup> against what he saw as the immature conception of heroism embraced by political romantics.

Yet there were also more romantic, or traditionally heroic, elements in Weber's own personal ethic – most significantly, his sense of *honor*, *integrity*, and *chivalry*. Honor for Weber consisted in a “minimal sense of shame and dignity which cannot be violated without punishment”;<sup>274</sup> while integrity was a matter of identifying with, and assuming responsibility for one's actions – and of striving to live up to “the duty of intellectual honesty”, by cultivating an “unswerving lucidity” about one's own commitments and conduct.<sup>275</sup> A sense of *chivalry* mandates respect and concern for one's opponents, as well as anyone over whom one has an advantage of power or status. This attitude of concern and respect – expressed in courtesy (not condescension) and solicitude (but not paternalistic control), and a willingness to stand up and advocate for victims of injustice or callousness – also involved certain ethically-evaluative attitudes which stood opposed to the brutal power-worship which revolted Weber in his own society: chivalry both condemned brutality, and insisted that mere brute power was nothing to be admired. A sense of chivalry could support commitment to democratic pluralism, insofar as the former encouraged, and the latter depended on, respect for opponents.

Weber's own sense of chivalry was linked to his liberalism, which was driven by a

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<sup>272</sup> Goldman, *Politics, Death and the Devil*, 222-3.

<sup>273</sup> Troeltsch, quoted in Derman 488.

<sup>274</sup> Weber, *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1958),, quoted Breiner 175.

<sup>275</sup> Weber, “Academic Freedom”, quoted Duncan Kelly, *The State of the Political*, 158.

persistent concern with underdogs, and an “ethical imperative ... to protect the adversary”.<sup>276</sup>

Thus, Lowith wrote that Weber stood opposed to the widespread, institutionalized anti-Semitism of his society because of his “feeling of chivalry and his well-developed sense of justice”; while Jaspers recalled that during the war Weber “showed a chivalrous concern for every prisoner who was accessible to him and did not hesitate to oppose the then prevailing nationalistic instincts, hatred and spy phobia. He never ceased to regard every man as a man, endowed with inalienable rights.”<sup>277</sup> His commitment to chivalry also inspired Weber's attacks on wartime chauvinism: “Abusing the enemy? That does not win wars. The fighting men out in the field are not doing so, and this wave of abuse, which grows in intensity the further its authors are from the trenches, is hardly worthy of a proud nation.”<sup>278</sup> Merleau-Ponty perceived this personal attitude as an important ingredient in Weber's liberalism, which “recognizes the rights of its adversaries, refuses to hate them, does not try to avoid confronting them ... Though he rejects nationalism [!], communism, pacifism, he does not want to outlaw them; he does not renounce the attempt to understand them.”<sup>279</sup>

This element of his personal ethic significantly qualified Weber's respect for Nietzsche,<sup>280</sup> Nietzsche was a “German philistine”, who had joined in the worship of power, and

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<sup>276</sup> Honigsheim, 115. This personal ethic helped shape Weber's well-known conception of the proper role of the scholar. Weber thought it cowardly and bullying to “exploit” the position of authority granted by the lecture-hall to express political opinions, which could not be contested by an audience compelled to silence. See e. g. “Science as a Vocation” FMW 146-7.

<sup>277</sup> Lowith, *My Life in Germany*, 18; Jaspers, *Three Essays*, 263.

<sup>278</sup> “Parliament and Democracy”, 131. See also Marianne Weber, 408-412.

<sup>279</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 26.

<sup>280</sup> Weber's debt to Nietzsche has been stressed by e. g. Robert Eden, *Political Leadership and Nihilism: A Study of Weber and Nietzsche* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1983); Hennis, *Essays in Reconstruction*, especially 146-62; David Owen, *Maturity and Modernity: Nietzsche, Weber, Foucault and the Ambivalence of Reason* (London: Routledge, 1997), 84-139; and Tracy Strong, *Politics Without Vision* (University of Chicago

the identification of greatness with “domination and brute force”.<sup>281</sup> Weber also dissented from Nietzsche in tracing religious – and subsequently, secular – ethics, not to the *ressentiment* of the weak, but to the desire for a “theodicy of fate” – the need of *all* individuals to find justification for their suffering or their flourishing.<sup>282</sup> This reflected Weber's larger concern with the phenomenon of *legitimation*. Weber was sensitive to the human need – reflecting a larger longing to believe in an ethically rational cosmos – to feel that actions and arrangements (particularly those that benefit them) are legitimate; and to the way that this quest for legitimation fostered the “profoundly unchivalrous attitude” of “ignoble self-righteousness”<sup>283</sup>

Another crucial virtue in Weber's “heroic” ethic was self-discipline, which was a necessary condition both for individual *dignity*, and for *prudence*.<sup>284</sup> “Cool self-control,” the ability to bear and withstand adversity, was for Weber the definitive quality of the modern “man of vocation” (Berufsmensch); it made possible not only the stolidly acquisitive bourgeois, but also a new model of hero,<sup>285</sup> marked by the courage of strong “nerves”, able to calmly withstand

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Press, 2012), 91-144.

<sup>281</sup> The latter phrase comes from Simmel, *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche* (1907); the former is from Weber's marginal notes in his copy of that book, quoted Schluchter 282n.36.

<sup>282</sup> See “The Social Psychology of the World Religions”, 271, 275-7; *Economy and Society*, 498 (where Weber calls Nietzsche's thesis of a “slave revolt in morality” bred by “ressentiment” “completely erroneous”).

<sup>283</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 355-6. On the longing for legitimation see e.g. “The Social Psychology of the World Religions”, 271, 281; “Religious Rejections of the World”, 350 (where Weber deprecates claims that individuals “merited” their happiness or other achievements, arguing that these should be attributed to “fate's fortune and grace”). Weber noted the particular prevalence of this tendency in contemporary German politics (see “Parliament and Government”, PW 136) and in academic life (stressing, against it, the “undeserved fate” of many in the “mad hazard” of academic life – and noting his own unmerited success; see “Science as a Vocation”, FMW 132-6).

<sup>284</sup> “The President of the Reich”, PW 308.

<sup>285</sup> E.g. “Cromwell's Ironsides, with cocked pistols in their hands, and approaching the enemy at a brisk trot without shooting, were not the superiors of the Cavaliers by virtue of their fierce passion, but on the contrary through their cool self-control, which enabled their leaders always to keep them well in hand. The knightly storm-attack

the fury of opponents and the vicissitudes of fate.<sup>286</sup> Dispositions of honor, chivalry, and dedication to a cause were necessary to save such self-discipline from coagulating into the mechanistic ethos of the “men of order”; while self-discipline was necessary to save noble sentiments from becoming a futile “politics of gesture”.

Weber's heroic ethos was marked not only by dispositions, but by related qualities of *tone*. Weber sought to maintain and encourage a tone of “sombre gravity” in dealing with the problems of life; he enjoined politicians to carry out their “sober work” in the “hard, clear air” in which alone politics can flourish.<sup>287</sup> An attitude of sobriety was a key to attaining *political maturity* – which Weber defined as consisting in “the trained ability to look at the realities of life with an unsparing gaze, to bear these realities and be a match for them inwardly”. Only such a capacity would allow political actors to live and act without illusion – or despairing disillusion: for politics in the modern world demanded a “steadfastness of heart which can withstand even the defeat of all hopes.” Only he who can “remain unbroken when the world, seen from his point of view, is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer it” is fit for politics, which requires the “slow, strong drilling through hard boards”; those who cannot meet this demand for fortitude would do better to “cultivate plain and simple brotherliness”, and work “soberly at their daily tasks”.<sup>288</sup>

This spirit of sobriety was associated with an unsentimental, clear-eyed “matter-of-

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of the Cavaliers, on the other hand, always resulted in dissolving their troops into atoms.” (PE 235-6).

<sup>286</sup> “Parliament and Government”, 231-2.

<sup>287</sup> “The Nation State and Economic Policy”, 14, 28. See also *ibid.*, 24.

<sup>288</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 369. We may note that even the ethos suitable to *private* life indicated here is marked by a spirit of sobriety. Those who cannot maintain sobriety at all, Weber seems to be suggesting, ought to avoid practical involvement altogether, restricting themselves, perhaps, to the aesthetic realm.

factness” (*Sachlichkeit*), which resolutely resisted wishful thinking and “priggish self-righteousness”.<sup>289</sup> The attainment and sustaining of matter-of-factness required “conscious self-scrutiny”, and an unsparing acknowledgment of the truth about *oneself*.<sup>290</sup> In Weber's practice, such “matter-of-factness” manifested itself in a *concretizing* approach, which “abjured all claims to represent 'totality'”, and asked “in connection with every social 'ideal', 'by what means and at what price it was attainable.’”<sup>291</sup> This focus on the concrete was tied to a particular orientation to political *time*: the politician who feels a sense of responsibility to and for his country will “think in terms of the next two or three generations”, and not further; he will be absorbed in questions that the visionary (or “littérateur”) regards as “ephemeral”, but which for him are crucial.<sup>292</sup>

The virtues for which Weber called – sobriety, lucidity, “resigned labor and modest honesty” (to quote Weber's student Edgard Jaffe), and avoidance of self-aggrandizement and self-indulgence – are “unspectacular, 'everyday' virtues, not 'extraordinary' ones”.<sup>293</sup> Yet they are austere demanding; and Weber did not expect many to be able to live up to the demands he set out. But he still insisted only the cultivation of a sense of “matter-of-factness” – and of “that very prosaic moral 'decency' [*Anständigkeit*]” and “*sense of shame*”, the erosion of which had been “our most grievous loss” in the war – could restore “poise [*Haltung*]” to a political life

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<sup>289</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 356; see also “Socialism”, 275; “Parliament and Government”, 222; “Constitutional Democracy in Russia”, 55.

<sup>290</sup> “The Nation State and Economic Policy”, 19; see also *ibid.*, 23.

<sup>291</sup> Derman, “Faith and Skepticism”, 500 (paraphrasing Jaspers); Marianne Weber, 599.

<sup>292</sup> “Parliament and Government”, 270.

<sup>293</sup> Schluchter 31, 610n127.

which had become dominated by “loathsome exhibitionism” and “mysticism.”<sup>294</sup>

Approaching Weber's two ethics as accounts of ethos rather than doctrine, and the interpretation of the substance of both ethics, offers a way of responding to some interpretive puzzles about the relationship of Weber's two ethics to one another, and to other political positions. One puzzle is whether the ethics of conviction and responsibility are irreconcilably opposed, or not; another is what Weber's own attitude to the ethic of conviction was. One view, based on solid textual evidence,<sup>295</sup> views the two ethics as embodying opposed moral doctrines which make mutually contradictory claims about moral evaluation; and sees Weber as a proponent of consequentialism against deontology. A more nuanced view (expressed by one close to Weber) sees the two ethics as oriented toward different “images” – that of the “saint” and that of the “hero”-- both of which represent valid ideals, between one must choose; in choosing either, one “sins against the other precept.” And all those who enter into politics must, in effect, embrace the image of the hero against that of the saint.<sup>296</sup>

Weber seems to contradict both of these interpretations – and himself – toward the end of the lecture, suddenly asserting that “the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility are not absolute opposites. They are complementary to one another, and only in combination do they produce the true human being who is *capable* of having a 'vocation for politics'”. Furthermore, to

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<sup>294</sup> Weber to Friedrich Crusius, November 24 1918 and December 26, 1918, quoted Marianne Weber, 636, 638 (translation modified).

<sup>295</sup> “[E]thically oriented activity can follow two fundamentally different, irreconcilably opposed maxims”; it is “not possible to unite” the two opposed ethics corresponding to these maxims (“Politics as a Vocation”, 359, 362).

<sup>296</sup> Honigsheim, 111. Cf. Orwell: “One must choose between God and Man, and all “radicals” and “progressives”, from the mildest Liberal to the most extreme Anarchist, have in effect chosen Man.” (Orwell, *All Art is Propaganda: Critical Essays*, ed. George Packer, [Mariner Books, 2009], 358) .

*wholly* lack an impulse toward fidelity to conviction is to be “inwardly dead”.<sup>297</sup> This passage becomes less surprising if we recall Weber's method of constructing “ideal types”, in which tendencies that are found in confused form in experience are “idealized” in the sense of being made rationally consistent. The ethics of conviction and responsibility represent “ideal types” of personality or outlook; actual individuals will approximate one or the other – and, ideally, to some extent both – in different degrees and moments.

Weber did not prescribe any one approximation of, or balance between, the two ethics, or specify at what point, and how far, to favor one or the other: “whether one *ought* to act on the basis of an ethics of conviction or one of responsibility, and *when* one should do the one or the other ... are not things about which one can give instructions to anybody”. All that one *can* say is that if “conviction-politicians spring up all around, proclaiming, ‘The world is stupid and base, not I. Responsibility for the consequences does not fall on me but on the others, in whose service I work and whose stupidity or baseness I shall eradicate’, I want to know what *inner weight* is carried by this ethic of conviction.” For “in nine cases out of ten”, such people are “windbags”, “intoxicated with romantic sensations.” On the other hand, it was “immensely moving” when a “mature person” who “feels with his whole soul the responsibility he bears for the real consequences of his actions, and who acts on the basis of an ethics of responsibility, says at some point, ‘Here I stand, I can do no other.’ That is something genuinely human and profoundly moving.”<sup>298</sup> This striking passage suggests, first, that for Weber what matters is not the maxim or moral that guides action, but the *attitude*, and the larger *outlook* and *character* of the actor. What matters is how serious one is, how far one recognizes and accepts costs, how much one blames

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<sup>297</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 367-8.

<sup>298</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 367. See the perceptive commentary in Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, 145.

others or accepts responsibility for the costs one incurs. In politics, at least, fidelity to conviction is serious and worthy of respect if, and only if, it is accompanied by such a sense of responsibility – a sense at once sober and scrupulous.

The reading offered here suggests that Weber's thought contributes to reflection on political ethics, not only in focusing attention on the phenomenon of ethos, but also in pointing to the dangers of *both* purism *and* end-maximalism – and, also of a certain ruthless, amoral realism, as represented by the worship of mere power and success. It also suggests a type of personality that might be able to resist or counter-act these tendencies, all of which Weber thought all-too-powerful in his time. But his account of politics and political leadership also contained elements that contributed to a sort of extremism and ruthlessness – because the ultimate criterion is the *cause*, and the only source of normative reference or guidance is a combination of practical judgment, and a sense of honor (conceived of in terms of service to the chosen cause); while there is sometimes a suggestion that political actors should recognize limits on the pursuit of their goals beyond those suggested by prudence and personal honor, these are under-developed.

### **E. A Liberal Problematic, and a Problematic Liberalism**

In this chapter I have sought to show, first, that Weber's political thought can be seen as centering on questions of political ethics, and that his discussion of political ethics can best be understood as offering an account of what I have termed ethos (as opposed to an account of different ethical doctrines or maxims). I have also stressed the roots of Weber's classic analysis of political ethics in his reaction against political extremism, romanticism, and irresponsibility – and his sense of political crisis. In this concluding section I will make the case that, despite



Weber's ambivalence, his political-ethical vision reflects a commitment to certain liberal values, and anxiety about liberalism's theoretical resources and practical capacity to function in modern society. I then conclude by considering the significance of Weber's arguments and example for later thinking about political ethics by both the enemies of liberalism, and its defenders.

A cloud of political dubiety hangs over Weber. Critics as acute and as far removed from one another as Georg Lukacs, Jurgen Habermas and Leo Strauss have seen in his thought the roots of the anti-liberal political irrationalism that consumed Germany.<sup>299</sup> On the other hand (or perhaps it amounts to the same thing?), Merleau-Ponty saw in Weber the moment when “the politics of understanding recognizes its limits, when liberalism stops believing in eternal harmony, legitimizes its adversaries, and conceives itself as a task”. On this view Weber was a “brand new” kind of liberal, who “admits that truth always leaves a margin of doubt ... and that history is the natural seat of violence.”<sup>300</sup> Others saw Weber as an unconventional but committed liberal – one who, had he lived longer, might have served as an inspiring leader of liberal forces in the Weimar Republic.<sup>301</sup>

Indeed, while he sometimes flirted with both hard-headed realism and passionate extremism, many of Weber's deepest allegiances were liberal ones. His wife Marianne wrote that

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<sup>299</sup> Habermas declared Carl Schmitt a “legitimate pupil” of Weber, adding that if Weber was a liberal, his was a dubiously “militant” liberalism, marked by “Caesar-like leadership democracy” and “national-state imperialism” (Habermas in Otto Stammer, ed., *Max Weber and Sociology Today*, trans Kathleen Morris [Harper and Row, 1971], 66). For Strauss, Weber was a crucial figure in the lineage of modern rejections of natural-law-based normative political science – and thus, the rise of the ethical nihilism that led to Nazism (Strauss, *Natural Right and History* [University of Chicago Press, 1965], 36-78). On Lukacs's critique of Weber, see chapter 2 below.

<sup>300</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans Joseph J. Bien (Northwestern University Press, 1973), 7.

<sup>301</sup> Thus Karl Lowith wrote, “if he had lived to experience 1933, I am certain he would have remained steadfast to the extreme in the face of the contemptible co-ordination of the German professoriat. The mass of apprehensive, weak and indifferent colleagues would have found a relentless opponent in him, and his words might possibly have averted the pathetic fate that the German 'intelligentsia' had prepared for itself”. (Lowith, *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933* [1939], trans Elizabeth King [University of Illinois Press, 1994], 17).

“*Intellectual freedom* was to him the greatest good”;<sup>302</sup> his friend Karl Jaspers claimed that what was “really essential” in Weber's thinking was “his sense of political freedom, of human dignity in politics”,<sup>303</sup> which in turn required each individual to be able to determine issues and affirm values for him- or herself. Weber's commitments align him with a tradition of liberal thinkers who sought to vindicate individual freedom against both institutional systems (bureaucracy), and intellectual systems (teleological determinism) – to preserve space for individual *choice* and “freedom of movement”.<sup>304</sup>

Weber particularly feared the rise of a new type of personality, the “men of order” (*Ordnungsmenschen*). He perceived his own society as dominated by a celebration of, and surrender to, an “ethos” founded on the “corporal's form of power”: “Give commands, fall in line, stand at attention, show off with big talk.”<sup>305</sup> Political authoritarianism and an ethos of deference and obedience had made Germans dependent on a “carapace of bureaucratic regimentation”; deprived of it, they were “insecure, self-conscious”, and incapable of acting responsibly and with dignity. For Weber, the “central question” of the day was how to foster an

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<sup>302</sup> Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: A Biography*, 120; see also *ibid.*, 359.

<sup>303</sup> Jaspers, *Three Essays*, 191; see also *ibid.* 260.

<sup>304</sup> See “On the Situation of Constitutional Democracy in Russia”, 73; “Parliament and Government”, 159. Cf. Löwith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, 69, 75, 78; Aron, *German Sociology* 68-71, 92, 106; Honigsheim, *The Unknown Max Weber*, 27, 104, 109, 198, 216; Marianne Weber, 88; Mommsen, *The Age of Bureaucracy*, xiii, xvi, 19-20; Hennis, *Essays in Reconstruction* 100. Anxiety about the corrosive effects on individuality of bureaucracy – and the tutelary rule of experts more broadly – runs as an important thread through liberal theory, figuring in the thought of e.g. Tocqueville, Mill, and Berlin. On Tocqueville (who may have invented the word bureaucracy) see especially Roger Boesche, *Tocqueville's Road Map: Methodology, Liberalism, Revolution and Despotism* (Lexington Books, 2006). On Mill, see Dennis F. Thompson *John Stuart Mill and Representative Government*, (Princeton University Press, 1976), 64-8; on the ambiguities in Mill's attitude see Alan Ryan, “Bureaucracy, Democracy, Liberty: Some Unanswered Questions in Mill's Politics”, in Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras, eds., *J. S. Mill's Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 147-65. For Berlin, see Joshua Cherniss, *A Mind and its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford University Press 2013), ch. 4.

<sup>305</sup> Weber to Naumann 14 December 1906, quoted Scaff 161 (the term “ethos” is Scaff's, not Weber's).

*ethos* fit for free human beings.<sup>306</sup>

This did not in itself make Weber a liberal – or at least, not a conventional one. Like Nietzsche, Weber rejected the “eudaimonism” of much liberalism, holding that the aim of politics was not the securing of happiness or material “well-being”, but the “*quality of the human beings*” reared in society.<sup>307</sup> As he wrote,

We want to cultivate and support what appears to us as valuable in man: his personal responsibility, his basic drive toward higher things, toward the spiritual and moral values of mankind, even where this drive confronts us in its most primitive form ...we must create the external conditions which will help to preserve in the face of the inevitable struggle for existence, with its suffering – the best that is in men, those physical and emotional qualities that we would like to maintain for the nation.<sup>308</sup>

Such a position had strong affinities with a certain strain of “aristocratic liberalism”.<sup>309</sup> But it also made Weber impatient with the more utilitarian, “bourgeois” elements of liberalism, and attracted to certain anti-liberal tendencies of his time.

In addition to rejecting what he took to be the debased goals of Anglo-Saxon liberalism, Weber saw many of liberalism's traditional solutions and hopes as aiding rather than braking the slide toward cultural and personal regimentation.<sup>310</sup> Capitalism had given rise to a power-structure of oligarchy and exploitation of workers by employers, and a culture of conformism,

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<sup>306</sup> “Parliament and Government”, PW 268; see also *ibid.*, 155-6, 161. The mention of “carapace” (*Gehäuse*) echoes Weber's famous image of the “steely casing” (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*, translated by Talcott Parsons as “iron cage”) in which modern man is trapped. On this theme see also Mueller, *Contesting Democracy*, 40-43; Harry Liebersohn, *Fate and Utopia in German Sociology, 1870-1923* (MIT Press, 1988).

<sup>307</sup> “The Nation State and Economic Policy”, PW 15.

<sup>308</sup> Weber, speech before the 1894 *Evangelisch-Soziale Kongress*, quoted Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (University of California Press, 1977), 44.

<sup>309</sup> See Alan Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burkhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>310</sup> See “The Meaning of ‘Ethical Neutrality’”, 28-39, 44-5; Blockland, 28-60. Löwith 61, 76-7; Honigsheim 185; Hennis, 166-97; Kim, 103-7.

obedience, and the instrumental use of others. Popular suffrage and representative democracy had created large party machines which fostered bureaucracy and effected the “spiritual proletarianisation” of the party rank-and-file.<sup>311</sup> Furthermore, liberalism rested on an optimistic, meliorist conception of human development which was not only false, but puerile; honesty and dignity demanded the embrace of a more tragic vision. Searching for “sources of resistance” to rationalization, Weber came to embrace “choice and struggle” – as opposed to compromise and bargaining – as the crucible for forming strong, responsible personalities.<sup>312</sup> If at least some earlier liberals (and proto-liberals) had sought to moderate passions of glory, honor, chivalry, Weber sought to revive them.

Despite his rejection of many tenets of earlier liberalism, Weber saw his commitment to an ideal of freedom, and respect for a certain degree of equality (which led him to bitterly attack paternalism<sup>313</sup>) as aligned with the historical ideals of liberalism – and therefore considered the cause of liberalism his own. Toward the conclusion of his diagnosis of the prospects of bourgeois democracy in Russia following the abortive revolution of 1905. Weber unsparingly noted the obstacles faced by, and the illusions and miscalculations of, the Russian liberals. Nevertheless, he concluded by affirming that the liberal goal of an “inalienable’ sphere of freedom and personality must be won *now*” for “the ordinary individual”, the individual who “belongs to the great masses and who is thrown entirely on his own resources – *now*, in the

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<sup>311</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 350-51, 365.

<sup>312</sup> Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, 194; see also *ibid* 200-202, 207; Mommsen, *Age of Bureaucracy*, 45-6; Löwith 45, 62. For Weber’s statements to this effect, see e. g. “Parliament and Government”, PW 181-2; “The Meaning of Discipline”, FMW 253-4, 262.

<sup>313</sup> See e. g. “Constitutional Democracy in Russia”, 50, 68-71.

course of the next few generations.”<sup>314</sup> And, connecting this call to action explicitly to his concern with the fate of personal freedom in a bureaucratic age, he declared it “vital for liberalism to understand that its vocation still lies with the struggle against both bureaucratic and Jacobin *centralism*, and in working to spread the old, fundamental, individualistic notion of ‘inalienable human rights’ amongst the masses, rights which have come to seem as ‘trivial’ to us Western Europeans as black bread is for the person who has enough to eat.”<sup>315</sup>

In the same work, Weber drew the connection between the plight of liberalism to problems of political ethics. “The paths of the social reformist, liberal democrats in Russia”, he warned, “are filled with renunciation”: for their “duty” to their ideals committed them to policies which worked to their political disadvantage.<sup>316</sup> The conflict between idealism and realism, and the ambiguity of the relationship of political ethics with the demands of morality, were thus intimately tied to the cause of liberalism in Weber's mind. Weber's defense of an ethos of responsibility and sobriety – and his attack on extremism and romanticism – can also be seen as connected to the defense of liberalism, as he conceived it. For Weber, political romanticism constituted an alternative and threat to the “matter-of-fact view of things characteristic of social reformist liberalism”. This matter-of-fact spirit of liberalism was, Weber insisted, a better basis for social reform than the volatile spirit of romanticism.<sup>317</sup> Weber feared that the “ecstasy of revolution” was acting as a “narcotic” on German radicals; and that the disappointment of their

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 67-8 (translation modified).

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 55-6, 71.

unrealistic hopes would leave revolutionaries “inwardly bankrupt”.<sup>318</sup>

On the other hand, Weber's celebration of a *heroic-ascetic* ethos is reminiscent of the revolutionary asceticism cultivated by Lenin, Sorel, and Lukacs. These thinkers – and later anti-liberals, such as Carl Schmitt – echoed, to varying degrees, Weber's condemnation of both eudaimonism, and the liberal ethos of moderated self-interest, benevolence, and common-sense.<sup>319</sup> Weber's own political ideal remained more individualistic, more hostile to the idea of ascetic heroism as consisting in absorption in collective movement, than that of his anti-liberal contemporaries.<sup>320</sup> Nevertheless, he sometimes endorsed not a sober balancing of rivalrous values, but a stark choice of, and complete dedication to, some “god”.<sup>321</sup> This line of response can be seen as encouraging radical commitment, and self-abnegation, to a cause – thus feeding into the attraction of the ethos of the radical, collectivist, anti-moralistic anti-liberalism of his day.<sup>322</sup> Even when he maintained a poise of sobriety, Weber sometimes evinced a harshly “realist” acceptance of ruthless action – as when he approved of the centrist Social Democrats' decision to make use of the right-wing, paramilitary *Freikorps* to violently crush radical uprisings in 1918-19. Weber's approval reflected an unflinchingly “realist” subordination of pity and personal scruple to the demands of maintaining political order.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Weber to Else Jaffe, quoted Beetham 172.

<sup>319</sup> Cf J. G. Merquior, “Georges Sorel and Max Weber”, *Max Weber and His Contemporaries*, 161-2, 166-7.

<sup>320</sup> Cf. Alan Ryan, “Mill and Weber on History, Freedom and Reason”, *Max Weber and His Contemporaries*, 178.

<sup>321</sup> See e.g. “Science as a Vocation”, FMW 156, 151, “Between Two Laws”, PW 78-9.

<sup>322</sup> See e.g. Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, 228-9; Goldman, *Politics, Death and the Devil*. On the different ways in which Weber was interpreted by his contemporaries – including “moderate” and “extremist” readings of Weber's message – see Joshua Derman, “Skepticism and Faith: Max Weber's Anti-Utopianism in the Eyes of his Contemporaries”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71:3 (2010), 481-503, particularly at 485-6, 490-91.

<sup>323</sup> On Weber's, and the government's, behalf, it may be argued that such drastic action saved Germany from

These sides of Weber pose challenges to liberalism, which proponents of a liberal ethos of moderation, balance, and distance *should* find disquieting. Politics is made with the head, but not with the head alone; passion is necessary to motivate political actors to engage in hard, grueling, morally ambiguous struggles – and non-rational power is needed to effect changes and preserve achievements. Liberalism, indeed, may require a degree of uncompromising, even quixotic, vehemence – and a hardened resignation to dealing in the “demonic” currency of coercion. But these qualities must be elaborated, or modified, in such a way as to make them “safe” for liberalism – to prevent them from turning liberals against the humane values and human ends they seek to serve. How far Weber succeeded in doing this remains debatable. Yet the problem remains one liberals must confront; and Weber’s meditations on it encompass resources which liberals may – and sometimes have – put to use.

Weber was, indeed, taken by later liberals as providing resources for their cause as a critic of extremism – and thus, it seemed to them, a champion of moderation and a “worldly”, pragmatic, anti-dogmatic temper in politics. Particularly representative was the use made of Weber by his fellow sociologist Daniel Bell. Bell took Weber's 'moral' to be that there is a “corruption inherent in each path [of “conviction” and pragmatism] if followed to its completion”: either loss of principle, or zealotry and fanaticism. There was also a danger, however, in seeking to combine the two elements in the wrong way – which could lead either to hard-headed cynicism and ruthlessness in pursuit of “ultimate ends” which themselves remained unquestioned (as in the case of the Bolsheviks); or to an attempt to combine democratic political action, with its demands for compromise, with an unbending moral purity (as in the case of

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dissolution and chaos. But it left a poisoned legacy for German democracy – an unbridgeable chasm between the far-left and center-left, which hampered their ability to counter threats from the right; and a lending of legitimacy to illegal, violent action.

certain social democratic leaders).<sup>324</sup> On this “liberal” reading, Weber can be seen as pointing to the dangers of, and renouncing, both types of “pure” politics – a morally pure politics purged of impure means, and a purely pragmatic, power-seeking politics purged of ethical conscience.

While there is some basis for seeing in Weber's work seeds both of the anti-liberalism of the inter-war period, and of the chastened liberalism of the post-war period, it is a mistake to identify Weber too closely with these later moments. For most of his career, Weber's concerns were very different from those of the later liberals chronicled in the second part of this study. He was oppressed, like many *fin de siècle* thinkers, by a sense of cultural and individual weakness, enervation, impotence, loss of meaning, and disconnection. He sympathized with, and partly shared, his contemporaries' longing for meaning, certainty, direction – and, at the same time, for release from the traditional beliefs and social forms that had once provided these. He was not free from the tendency – given such powerful direction by Nietzsche – to mourn for the decadence of bourgeois culture, while also scornfully castigating this culture and glorying in its death-throes, and hoping for a new dawn of vitality. Thinking against this cultural backdrop, Weber was primarily concerned with combating the loss of inner strength and meaning, the weakness of “personality”, the moral flabbiness and political immaturity he saw around him.<sup>325</sup>

In “Politics as a Vocation” Weber came to grapple with the need to develop a compelling response to the rejection of the institutions, values, and outlook of liberalism. But he was still not confronted by the problem of totalitarianism – that is, ideological extremism combined with a political compound of charismatic leadership, ecstatic mass movement, and large unfettered

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<sup>324</sup> Bell, “First Love and Early Sorrows”, 536.

<sup>325</sup> Cf. Goldman *Politics, Death and the Devil*, 261-2, 266-7; Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, 214.



bureaucracy.<sup>326</sup> His political outlook and response was thus significantly different from those of later, anti-totalitarian liberals. Where he resembled them was, first, in his concern with defending individuality and freedom in the face of technocratic tendencies; second, in his focus on individual character as both a means and goal of politics – so that both the goals and the necessary conditions of liberalism were identified with the development of a certain character and ethos; and third, a conception of a liberal ethos in which passion, commitment and conviction were combined with a sober distance and realism, and a freedom from illusion and independence of dogma.

This particular balance of passion and sobriety, idealism and realism, were features of Weber's other great ethic – the ethic of scholarship articulated in “Science as a Vocation.” The relationship of the ethical ideal presented in that lecture, and in “Politics as a Vocation”, has been much debated. Some see the two ethics as far more closely related than Weber himself – with his deeply-felt suggestion of irreconcilable conflict, and a need to choose, between the “vocations” of scholarship and of politics – believed.<sup>327</sup> Others have suggested that the skeptical independence and cool-headed resistance to illusion and enthusiasm presented in the “Science” lecture actually present a better model for the ethics of (liberal, democratic) politics than Weber's own account of a political ethic.<sup>328</sup> Both arguments have merit, but neither is entirely correct. In some respects, at least, the “vocations” of scholarship and politics differ in their objectives and in the *means* employed, and thus in the types of skills and judgment demanded, by each. And the

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<sup>326</sup> Mommsen, *The Age of Bureaucracy*, 93.

<sup>327</sup> This case has been made particularly powerfully in Schluchter, *op.cit.*

<sup>328</sup> E.g. Villa, *op.cit.*

scholar – not having to reckon with the “diabolical” force of violence, and having less direct power (generally) over the immediate fates of others, can afford to be less consciously responsible to and for others. The vocation of scholarship admits of a degree of single-mindedness, a certain sort of extremism and ruthlessness – an extremism in dedication to truth, and a ruthlessness in subjecting one's own assumptions and wishes to critical scrutiny<sup>329</sup> – that the compromised, compromising politician cannot afford. Weber's dedication to scholarship allowed him to retain a degree of individual independence of ideology and political movements – and a disinterested perspective on power – which preserved him from the leap into ruthless political dogmatism of, for instance, his pupil Lukacs; but dedication to intellectual rigor was also at the root of his contempt for many political moderates, and his admiration for the rigor and consistency of some extremists.

However, there *are* affinities between the ethos demanded by the vocation of politics, and that demanded by the vocation of science: both require a balance of sobriety and passion, and demand self-discipline and forbearance, for the sake of serving values; and both demand a sensitive and relentless questing after reality. It was, indeed, Weber's embodiment of the ethical elements uniting the scientist and the conscientious political actor – his combination of a passionate impulse to penetrate and dispel illusion, a sombre estimation of the challenges confronting liberalism, and a dedication, in spite of all, to championing liberal values – that gave his figure its inspiring power, as Karl Lowith attested:

The acuteness of the questions he posed corresponded with his refusal to offer any cheap solutions. He tore down all the veils from desirable objects, yet everyone none the less sensed that the heart of this clear-thinking intellect was profoundly humane. After the

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<sup>329</sup> Asked what his his scholarly work meant to him, Weber is reported to have replied “I want to see how much I can bear” (Marianne Weber, 678).

innumerable revolutionary speeches by the literary activists, Weber's words were like a salvation ... The German universities have not had another teacher of his caliber since.<sup>330</sup> Some have suggested that Weber's "tearing down of all the veils" leaves liberalism itself

without a foundation to stand on. But Weber's insistence on the contingency and fragility of liberalism, sobering as it is, is only a normative problem from the perspective of an ethic of success, which identifies a position's normative validity with its having a guarantee of "winning out" in history; or an ethic of (normative) necessity, which identifies normative validity with a position's ability to compel assent through logical necessity. Weber himself rejected both of these ways of thinking; and this rejection was central to his revision of liberalism. If liberals sloughed off the elements within liberal thought that reflected an ethic of necessity and an ethic of success (natural law theory and an assumption of historical meliorism, respectively), they could fortify their commitments – and themselves – for the hard and chancy struggle ahead. To look for guarantees was an act of "weakness and vanity", which ultimately vitiated commitment to liberalism, and liberal commitments to freedom and dignity. Liberals should exemplify, as well as advocate, a dignified and free life, by affirming and standing up for principles without guarantees: they should "have the courage ... to die for undemonstrated and unself-evident positions, not bolstered by absolute faith."<sup>331</sup>

Despite the ambiguous implications of his arguments, that Weber himself would have shared the moral responses of his liberal-humanist admirers and heirs is suggested by an incident from 1918. Weber was discussing the new – and still very tenuous – Soviet regime in a cafe with Joseph Schumpeter, and the banker and political economist Felix Somary. According to

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<sup>330</sup> Lowith, *My Life in Germany*, 16-17.

<sup>331</sup> While the sentiment here is, I believe, Weber's, the words come from Isaiah Berlin (letter to Myron Gilmore 26 December 1949, in Berlin, *Enlightening* 152).

Somary's later account, Schumpeter

gleefully declared that socialism had finally ceased to be a 'paper discussion', but now had to prove its viability. Weber vehemently countered that trying socialism in Russia, given the country's level of development, was basically a crime and would end in catastrophe ... Schumpeter coolly replied that this might well be, but that Russia would constitute a 'nice laboratory'. Weber exploded: 'A laboratory with heaps of human corpses.' Schumpeter pointed out: 'That's what every anatomy lab is.' The exchange grew even more heated, Weber became louder, Schumpeter more sarcastic, until Weber finally jumped up, exclaiming, 'This is unbearable!' and stormed out ... Schumpeter wondered aloud how 'anyone could yell like this in a coffeehouse.'<sup>332</sup>

Both Schumpeter's cold "objectivity", and a far warmer faith in the "experiment" of totalitarian social engineering, would be widespread in the decades that followed. In his passionate reaction of moral protest, as well as in his advocacy of a cool but scrupulous ethic of responsibility that would stand against the moral levity of both clinical and chiliastic approaches to politics, Weber stands as the first of a series of voices of liberal dissent. His somber, at times tragic, liberalism, and the ethic or ethos to which it was tied, resembles – and in some cases was a direct inspiration for – later thinkers who would also re-cast liberalism for the dark times of the twentieth century, that age of both "icy darkness", and crematory fires.

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<sup>332</sup> Somary, quoted Mueller, *Contesting Democracy*, 40.

## **Chapter 2. Tactics and Ethics Between Realism and Utopia:** **The Uneasy Bolshevism of Gyorgy Lukacs**

*“We know power is evil. But if the kingdom is to come, the dualism between good and evil, between this world and the next, between power and the Spirit, must be temporarily abrogated and transformed in a principle that unites asceticism and dominion, That is what I call the necessity of terror.”<sup>333</sup>*

*“We became devils in order to rid the earth of hell”<sup>334</sup>*

When he delivered “Politics as a Vocation”, Weber likely had in mind not only Toller, but another former member of his Heidelberg circle who, by 1919, had embarked on radical politics: Georg (Gyorgy) Lukacs. It is probably going too far to conclude, as Daniel Bell did, that “it was Lukacs's decision that had promoted Weber's anguish.”<sup>335</sup> Nevertheless, the connection between the two men was important for them both. Upon becoming a member of Weber's circle in 1913, the young Hungarian had a striking impact on the older man – whenever he spoke to Lukacs, Weber would think about their discussion for days thereafter; he knew and was impressed by Lukacs' early ethical writings.<sup>336</sup> Lukacs, for his part, was struck by Weber's writings on the economic ethics of world religions – in which he set out his psychology of

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<sup>333</sup> Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. John E. Woods (Everymans' Library, 2005), 476.

<sup>334</sup> Erwin Šinko, *Optimisti (The Optimists)*, quoted in Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought and Politics* (Blackwell, 1991), 214.

<sup>335</sup> Bell, “First Love and Early Sorrows”, 547. Weber appears to refer to the arguments of Lukacs's “Tactics and Ethics” and several of the essays that would make up *History and Class Consciousness*, and paraphrases some almost verbatim— suggesting that he had either seen (some version of) the essay before its publication, or that Lukacs had presented the core of his later position to Weber in conversation. (John E. Seery, “Marxism as Artwork: Weber and Lukacs in Heidelberg, 1912-1914”, *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 27 (1982), 150-51; Arpad Kadarkay, *Lukacs Reader*, 213; see e.g. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 930). But he would not have been familiar with these works when he wrote and delivered “Politics as a Vocation”; and it seems unlikely he would have read “Bolshevism as a Moral Problem”, published in Hungarian the month before.

<sup>336</sup> Lee Congdon, *The Young Lukacs* (University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 85.

asceticism.<sup>337</sup> Lukacs's later struggle with questions of party organization – a core concern of his political thought – was informed, or haunted, by Weber's picture of the modern party-machine.<sup>338</sup>

Beyond the particular context of his relationship with Weber, Lukacs's political and intellectual trajectory encapsulates larger phenomena in the moral and political imagination of his generation – and perhaps the political imaginations of all those who were attracted to revolutionary politics and radical ideologies out of moral revolt against bourgeois-liberal society. This was the phenomenon of the moral absolutist whose conscience prompts him (or her) toward both political idealism, and an ascetic code of personal purity – and who comes to excuse, indeed share in, ruthlessness and opportunism for the sake of achieving political goals. Lukacs articulated his sentiments and defended his decisions with a sophistication – and convolution – that both enrich, and complicate, the understanding of the ethical impulse of radical politics offered by Weber and other critics. His thought, and his fate, also throw Weber's arguments into a sharper light. Lukacs's case represents a particularly striking example of the combination, not only of moral protest with dedication to political efficacy, but of differing moral impulses: an absolutist moral purism which rejected compromise, a utopian yearning that rejected limitation, gradualism, and caution, *and* a rigorous sense of duty and responsibility which demanded a hardening of the heart through the morally scarring process of struggle. An extended look at Lukacs thus provides both an important step in making sense of Weber, and a good starting-point for a exploration of the ethos and ethics of anti-liberalism.

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<sup>337</sup> Lukacs to Weber, 1915, in *Georg Lukacs: Selected Correspondence*, ed. Judith Marcus and Zoltan Tar (Columbia University Press, 1986), 253-4.

<sup>338</sup> See Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Merlin Press, 1970)

Accordingly, I will here explore, not Lukacs's thought as a whole, but what I term the “Lukacs problem”: how it was that Lukacs moved – or leaped – from a puristic “ethical idealism”, which rejected the moral compromises and corruption of politics, to the “grim pursuit of *realpolitik*”, involving deception, compromise of principles, and violence.<sup>339</sup>

#### **A. From Purism to Ruthlessness: The “Lukacs Problem”**

In 1919 the newly-declared Hungarian Soviet Republic was struggling for survival, not only against internal opponents, but against the armies of neighboring nations. Lukacs was acting as People's Commissar for Education and Culture during the weekends, and serving as a political commissar in the Hungarian Red Army on weekdays. The desperate struggle called, on occasion, for desperate actions. As Lukacs later recalled,

It was our job to defend Tiszafured from the Rumanian attack, and we could have succeeded had there not been a Budapest battalion that simply fled ... Thinking reasonably, it was not difficult to conclude that it was indispensable to set up a drum-head court-martial, condemn a few from the Budapest battalion to death and have them shot in the market place where the other two battalions stood, so that everybody should see it.<sup>340</sup>

Lukacs duly had the unit of “cowards” assembled, and eight soldiers’ names read out by the commanding officer. These eight were marched under guard to the outskirts of the town. One escaped; one was pardoned; the remaining six were shot.<sup>341</sup>

Lukacs had traveled a long road to this point. The young Lukacs exhibited, in his countryman Arthur Koestler's terms, the outlook of the yogi, rather than that of the commissar. Repulsed and anguished by a sense of atomization, solitude, alienation and meaninglessness,

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<sup>339</sup> Kadarkay 205.

<sup>340</sup> Lukacs, interviewed 1971, quoted in *Gyorgy Lukacs: A Life in Pictures and Documents*, compiled and edited by Eva Fekete and Eva Karadi, trans. Peter Balaban and Kenneth McRobbie (Corvina Kiado, 1981), 100.

<sup>341</sup> Kadarkay 223. Such measures were unavailing: Budapest soon fell, and with it, the Hungarian Soviet Republic.

hating the “inhumanity of individualistic, capitalist society”, Lukacs looked toward an internal “moral revolution”, rather than political change – the prospect of which seemed hopeless, and the process of which (at least as represented by social-democratic politics) seemed morally sullyng.<sup>342</sup>

While Lukacs's revolt initially took a (largely<sup>343</sup>) apolitical form, there was a political dimension to his motivation. Lukacs and his peers were opposed to “the bourgeoisie, liberalism, the constitutional state, parliamentarianism, revisionistic socialism, the Enlightenment, relativism and individualism”. This partly reflected a spiritual hunger, and a cultivated young man’s recoiling from vulgarity; it also reflected a moral revulsion at inequality and hypocrisy. As Lukacs remarked, “All this individualism is just humbug; Stefan George is allowed to be a personality, but a policeman and coachman are not.”<sup>344</sup> But it was not only the fact of injustice that repulsed Lukacs and his generation. They also recoiled from liberalism as an attitude or ethos: they had, Lukacs declared, “no tolerance for the tolerance of their liberal elders”.<sup>345</sup> Lukacs was an absolutist, whose “all-or-nothing” perspective rejected “all degrees and transitions”.<sup>346</sup> There could be no halfway-house for the soul. Thus in an early autobiographical work he had his protagonist declare, “I can no longer bear the unclarity and dishonesty of everyday life”; he concluded the story by quoting the same passage from Revelations that Rosa

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<sup>342</sup> Mary Gluck, *Georg Lukacs and His Generation* (Harvard University Press, 1985), 24-5; quoting Anna Lesznai; see also *ibid* 65, 120, 135, 141-2, 144, 188; Michael Lowy, *Georg Lukacs: From Romanticism to Bolshevism* (New Left Books, 1979), 99, 109 (quoting Lukacs to Paul Ernst, September 1911).

<sup>343</sup> Lukacs had briefly belonged to a socialist students group in Budapest, but his political engagement had waned.

<sup>344</sup> Honigsheim 147-8, 151.

<sup>345</sup> Gluck, 27; see also *ibid* 47-62, 104, 110, 118; H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* (Vintage, 1958), 338, 395.

<sup>346</sup> Lowy *op. cit.*, 96-7, 100-103 (quoting Lucien Goldmann, *Kierkegaard vivant*).



Luxemburg would hurl at Kautsky: “I know your Works, that you are neither cold nor warm; oh, if only you were cold or warm. Because you are lukewarm, however ... I will spit you out of my mouth.”<sup>347</sup>

Lukacs was, at this point, something of a “political romantic”, whose outlook was much like that later summed up by Jorge Semprun: “When all is said and done the day-to-day aspects of politics have always bored you; politics has interested you only as risk and as total commitment.”<sup>348</sup> The available political vehicles of pre-war Austro-Hungarian and German society did not satisfy Lukacs's particular blend of romanticism and intellectual rigor. Matters began to change with the declaration of war in August 1914. Horrified by the militarism of Weber and other German friends, Lukacs regarded his day as, in Fichte's words, “the period of perfect sinfulness”: “a crisis of culture from which the only way out was a revolution.”<sup>349</sup> The main fruit of Lukacs' response to the war, *Theory of the Novel* (written 1914-15), while apparently a work of literary analysis, articulated an ethical vision with political implications;<sup>350</sup> though written in a mood of despair, it provided the first statement of Lukacs' emerging utopianism.

From his earliest writings, Lukacs had been particularly sensitive to what would become

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<sup>347</sup> Lukacs, “On Poverty of the Spirit”, trans. John T. Sanders, *The Philosophical Forum* 3 (1971/2), 380, 385.

<sup>348</sup> Jorge Semprun, *Communism in Spain in the Franco Era: The Autobiography of Frederico Sanchez* (The Harvester, Press, 1980), 7.

<sup>349</sup> Lukacs, “Art and Society – Preface”, *New Hungarian Quarterly* XIII (1972): 47, 46.

<sup>350</sup> While my concern here is primarily with the ethical content of Lukacs's work, the way in which he approached ethical issues through literature is worth underscoring. A similar use of literary criticism as a vehicle for ethical insight and reflection, would mark later mark the work of such (ideologically very different) figures as Berlin Trilling, and Michnik; while both Thomas Mann and Arthur Koestler would address issues raised by Lukacs's own political career in their novels (and Mann would use Lukacs as the basis of a character in *The Magic Mountain*). This is fitting: the narrative and psychologizing method of the modern novel is often able to convey ethical problems, and the phenomenon of ethos, more effectively than more abstract, less particularizing, genres.

known as “the problem of dirty hands” – the tragic incurring of moral guilt in the pursuit of moral ends. In *History of the Evolution of Modern Drama* (1911), he declared that life's greatest tragedy was that “it imposes evils on morally pure human beings, that it is not possible to remain pure and still live.”<sup>351</sup> In the wake of a more personal tragedy – the suicide of Irma Seidler, the woman he loved – Lukacs came to reject the Kantian ethic of duty he found dominant in his society, embracing instead an ethic of radical goodness. “Goodness”, like the “ethics of conviction”, is defined by subjective intention, “the absolute and perceptive *desire* to help” – even if the actual results of this desire are disastrous: “What does goodness care for consequences ... all consequences lie in the external world of mechanical forces, unconcerned with us ... goodness is divine, metapsychological. When goodness appears in us, paradise has become reality and the divinity is awakened in us...”<sup>352</sup>

Weber was familiar with “On Poverty of Spirit”; and some have suggested that his two ethics are derived from Lukacs.<sup>353</sup> The “ethic of goodness” appears analogous to Weber's ethics of conviction. Both focus on purity of intention, rather than the consequences of action; they aim at a sort of personal perfection, a radical overcoming of the shortcomings of the world. On the other hand, the “ethics of duty” and the “ethic of responsibility” seem akin in their stoic spirit of prosaic dutifulness. To draw a direct analogy is however mistaken: *both* of the ethics articulated by Lukacs fall within what Weber regarded as religious (and anti-worldly) ethics of

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<sup>351</sup> Quoted Congdon 140.

<sup>352</sup> “On Poverty of Spirit”, 374-6.

<sup>353</sup> Max Beiersdoerfer, *Max Weber und Georg Lukacs: Über die Beziehung von verstehender Soziologie und Westlichem Marxismus* (1986).

conviction.<sup>354</sup> The “ethic of goodness”, nevertheless, does resemble at least one facet of the “ethic of conviction” – and it, along with Lukacs's subsequent actions, may have underlined for Weber the way in which “acosmic love” is paradoxically related to political ruthlessness. For, on Lukacs's account, goodness was not “mild, refined, or quietistic”, but “wild, terrible, blind, and adventurous”; the good man's soul is like “a pure white slate, upon which fate writes its absurd command, and this command will be followed blindly, rashly and fiercely to the end.” The saint “has to be a sinner first; only through sinning ... can he completely conquer life ... he can only find his way to God by having been in a state of sin beforehand.” But the good man sinned in order to save others: he sacrificed personal purity for a higher, unselfish goodness. While goodness rejects the purity of “clean-kept hands”, the life of goodness offered a “higher purity”, which can be sustained through “sin, deception and horror”.<sup>355</sup> Maintaining such purity required a radical asceticism, an emptying out of self so as to make oneself a “vessel” for “spirit”, an instrument for the “work”.<sup>356</sup> This connected the “ethic of goodness” to the ethos of revolutionary action, which held that “The imperative is to sacrifice everything for the revolution: our thoughts, feelings, happiness and pain.”<sup>357</sup>

Such positive action was not possible for the protagonist of “On Poverty of Spirit” – or, at this stage, its author. In an intolerably impure world, the only alternatives seemed to be the hope of transcendence, or despairing resignation. Lukacs was still struggling to find his way out of this seeming impasse when he wrote *The Theory of the Novel*. Here he set out a typology of

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<sup>354</sup> Cf. Schulchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 275-7n.8. Lukacs's ethic of duty, after all, is a stylized version of Kantian deontic ethics.

<sup>355</sup> “On Poverty of Spirit”, 377-8 (translation modified); see also Gluck 189-91; Congdon, 68-9.

<sup>356</sup> “On Poverty of Spirit” 381, 383.

<sup>357</sup> Quoted Kadarkay, 249.

the novel based on the hero's responses to an alienating social world. The first two were “abstract idealism” – quixotic rebellion in the name of the Ought; and the “romanticism of disillusionment” – resignation, passivity, retreat into narcissistic contemplation. In Dostoevsky, however, there was a suggestion of a third response: a utopian hope and striving for a “Coming Light”, a “frictionless community where people would live their lives 'without distance'”, in which individuals would each be able to develop their own capacities fully, and to know and love one another.<sup>358</sup>

There was a dark side to this bright utopian vision. Lukacs saw Dostoevsky's utopian ideal as linked to the psychology and ethics of terrorism. In “On Poverty of Spirit”, Lukacs had already invoked Russian terrorism as exemplifying the ethic of goodness. The terrorist is an idealist who “directs his soul not inward but outward toward humanity ... in order to save his soul, he is forced to sacrifice it. On the basis of a mystical ethic, he has to become a cruel *Realpolitiker*, and break the absolute commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill.'”<sup>359</sup> Now even more convinced of the evil of the times in which he lived, Lukacs found in Dostoevsky a rationale for embracing political revolution.<sup>360</sup>

In October 1918, Lukacs found himself having to decide how to apply his often obscure ideas amid the political strife, upheaval and polarization unleashed by the (liberal) Hungarian

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<sup>358</sup> *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (MIT Press, 1971), particularly 56-69, 97-132, 144-54; Gluck 192. Cf. “On Poverty of Spirit”, 375.

<sup>359</sup> “On Poverty of Spirit”, 375; Gluck, 192-3.

<sup>360</sup> This may seem a perverse reading of the author of *Demons*. Yet the linkage of the ethic of Russia terrorism to Dostoevsky's heroes was perceptive. Dostoevsky had projected a sequel to *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which Alyosha Karamazov would be led inexorably to politics, and ultimately to terrorism and self-sacrifice (diary entry of A. S. Suvorin from 1887, quoted in Isaiah Berlin, “Fathers and Children: Turgenev and the Liberal Predicament”, *Russian Thinkers*, 352). Although the sequel was never written, Alyosha's affinity with revolution was still legible to readers of Lukacs's day: thus his friend Paul Ernst wrote in 1918 that “The Bolsheviks are today seeking to accomplish what Dostoevsky envisaged through Alyosha” (quoted Lowy, 114n.81).

revolution. Faced by “reactionary forces then organizing more and more energetically”, many – including Lukacs – despaired of the confusion, seeming impotence, and apparent hypocrisy of the liberals and social democrats. In contrast, the Hungarian Communists under Bela Kun – and the Soviet Revolution led by Lenin – offered a model of “decisive leadership, simple analysis, and above all hope for the future”.<sup>361</sup> As so often, despair at liberal weakness inspired an abandonment of scruples in favor of the politically strong (and intellectually “tough”) refuge of illiberal ideology.

Lukacs was in some respects predisposed to the radical turn he now contemplated. Liberalism – and social democracy – lacked the “religious energy that could fulfill one's entire life”. Revolution offered total transformation, without the compromises and muddles of social democracy. Yet at the same time Lukacs's bent toward moral absolutism made him hesitant to accept the need for “dirty hands.” Thus in 1918 he declared the morality of action to be completely independent of consequences: an *authentic* action follows from a transcendent moral command: “Make the kingdom of God come down to earth *at once*”. This imperative may be satisfied in one of two ways: *direct* ethical action, which sets out to “change men's souls” and “pays no heed to the detour of politics”; or political action which seeks to “create institutions corresponding as far as possible to ethical ideals, and to bring about the disappearance of those which hinder the realization of such ideals.”<sup>362</sup> Lukacs thus appeared as an apostle of “utopianism”, against more “realist” strains of political radicalism. Whether through individual

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<sup>361</sup> Gluck, 200-201, 204; Lukacs, *Autobiography*, quoted Lowy 139.

<sup>362</sup> Lukacs, “On Conservative and Progressive Idealism”, quoted Lowy 125-7. One radical opponent identified this position with “Tolstoyan ethical socialism” (Lajos Kassak, quoted *ibid.*) – suggesting how far Lukacs, at this point, fit Weber's paradigm of the ethic of conviction. See also Kadarkay, 194-5.

conduct or institutional innovation, political action must both conform to, and realized *directly*, absolute moral principles of justice and benevolence.

Lukacs confronted the alternatives before him in his article “Bolshevism as a Moral Problem”, published in December 1918.<sup>363</sup> For Lukacs, approaching Bolshevism as an *ethical* problem meant considering the relationship between the means adopted by Bolshevism in pursuing power, and the moral ends at which Communism aimed. More specifically, Lukacs asked whether democracy was simply a “tactical weapon” for socialism, to be discarded when it proved ineffective; or whether it was “so integral to socialism that it cannot be omitted”. Socialism aimed at a fundamental social transformation, the creation of “a society in which freedom of morality will take the place of legal compulsion in the regulation of all behaviour”.<sup>364</sup> But, as a movement seeking to effect change within the existing world of class conflict, socialism was in danger of itself falling prey to the violent, oppressive logic of that world. The “emancipation of the proletariat” would invert the current social order: the ruled would become the rulers. But the ultimate goal of socialism – democracy, understood as a condition in which relations of domination had been eliminated – would not thereby be realized. And the commitment to democracy was “such an integral part of the socialist world view, that it cannot be removed without endangering the collapse of the whole edifice”; to compromise the commitment to democracy threatened to turn socialism into yet another “ideological cover for

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<sup>363</sup> Lukacs later described the article as a “misguided” “apologia”, “fortified with abstract and philistine arguments” (Lukacs, “Preface” (1967) to *History and Class Consciousness* [cited as HCC] (1923), trans. Rodney Livingstone (Merlin Press, 1971), xi.

<sup>364</sup> “The Role of Morality in Communist Production”, *Tactics and Ethics: Political Writings 1919-1929*, trans Rodney Livingstone (New Left Books, 1972) [cited as TE], 48.

class interest”.<sup>365</sup>

While Lukacs rejected the means of revolution and dictatorship, he also acknowledged that socialists faced a dilemma. For to refuse to bring about a new society through the use of the “old” means of coercion, and “insist on creating a new world with new means” ran the risk of merely prolonging the wait for the new order. Furthermore, commitment to democratic means meant seeking cooperation with elements who were fundamentally opposed to socialism – and thus could not be trusted. Both the path of dictatorial means and that of adherence to democratic ideals involved “potentially terrifying sins and countless errors”. The challenge was to find a form of collaboration which would allow social democracy to further its goals, without “endangering the *purity*” of these goals. But it would be “extremely difficult, if not impossible, to prevent our deviation from the straight path of *conviction* becoming a self-serving act”, and without the delay undermining the “pathos” of moral will which animated socialism.<sup>366</sup>

The Bolshevik response to this problem was to dismiss it. There was no tension between socialism's goal of democracy, and the means of (revolutionary *or* dictatorial) violence. Therefore, one did not have to sacrifice principle. “The key to Bolshevism’s fascinating power is that it frees us from ... compromise.” Lukacs felt the force of this power. But he also warned that those attracted to Bolshevism must confront the ethical question it raised: “can good be achieved through evil means, and freedom by tyranny; can a new world be achieved if the instruments of its realization are only technically different from the justly abhorred methods of the old order?” Bolshevism was based on the “metaphysical assumption that good can issue from evil, that it is

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<sup>365</sup> “Bolshevism as an Ethical Problem”, 217-18.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid. 218-19, translation modified and emphasis added.

possible, as Razumkin says in *Crime and Punishment*, to lie our way to the truth. This writer cannot share this faith”; therefore, Bolshevism presented “an insoluble ethical dilemma.”<sup>367</sup>

At this point Lukacs seemed poised to embrace the “rather sluggish, seemingly non-heroic” path of democracy, with its “profound demand for responsibility, and long struggles that instruct and educate.” While in “Bolshevism, the individual can, if he so desires, preserve – no matter at what cost – the apparent *purity of his conviction*”, in democracy the individual must “consciously surrender his conviction”. Democracy demanded “only [!] superhuman self-abnegation and self-sacrifice from those who, consciously and honestly, persevere to the very end”; as arduous as this demand was, it at least did not involve the insoluble paradoxes of “Bolshevism’s moral problem”.<sup>368</sup> Thus Bolshevism is identified with purism and an ethic of conviction (even though it has earlier been shown to require a results-oriented adoption of means that run counter to the ideals of socialism); democracy is identified with an ethic of responsibility – and with the sacrifice of personal purity to the larger cause.

This language of self-discipline, self-abnegation, and self-sacrifice would continue to mark Lukacs' approach to political ethics: but his understanding of the direction in which it pointed changed rapidly. By the time “Bolshevism as a Moral Problem” was published, Lukacs had – to the shock of his friends – joined the Hungarian Communist Party. In a direct reversal, he now embraced a Marxian view that “a pact with the Devil [is] the only way which leads to God”, i.e. that the “march of history” or “cunning of reason” will “transform individual evil into the

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid. 219-20, translation modified.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid. 220, translation modified.



very vehicle of progress which will bring about the good as a whole.”<sup>369</sup> Within weeks, he had seemingly switched abruptly from a position of moral purism – and political scrupulousness and moderation – to an embrace of ruthlessness, even of acknowledged sin, for the sake of efficacy.

### **B. Terror as Historical Necessity and Moral Duty: Lukacs's Turn to Communism**

We may be less surprised at this transformation than Lukacs's friends, and not just because we have the benefit of hindsight. As we have seen, in his earlier ethic of “goodness” Lukacs had already affirmed that the path to good may be through evil – and had linked this moral paradox to the ethics of Russian terrorism. Furthermore, the seemingly resolute rejection of Bolshevism in “Bolshevism as an Ethical Problem” was in fact an unstable one. Both of the alternatives Lukacs articulated violated his underlying “ethical rigorism” and “rejection of compromise”. He had temporarily been able to talk himself into an embrace of the petty compromises of coalition politics by casting democracy in dramatic, heroic terms – as Weber would shortly do in “Politics as a Vocation” (and using the same concept of “responsibility”). But, in the midst of a struggle between revolutionary and reactionary forces, it could easily appear that it was adherence to democratic means that was both *selfish* and *irresponsible* – or else naïve – while Bolshevism represented a responsible sacrifice of principle for the sake of *real* achievement.

His conversion to Bolshevism also reflected Lukacs's underlying intellectual *radicalism* – his tendency to configure reality in terms of stark dichotomies, and to see historical situations in terms of a drastic choice between drastic alternatives, “mutually exclusive opposites” which

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<sup>369</sup> Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, 174-6, quoted Lowy 137-8.

were “separated from each other sharply and definitively”.<sup>370</sup> Lukacs concluded that one could not just “sample Marxism”. If one converted to socialism, one had to stake one's whole life and soul on the revolution.<sup>371</sup>

The reasons for Lukacs's conversion to Communism are complicated, and specific to his situation and personal history; but they do suggest a larger feature of the puristic mindset that he had exhibited. Such a mindset, dealing in absolutes, was primed to make a leap from one extreme to another – from extreme scrupulousness, to acquiescence to (or embrace of) ruthlessness. This reflects a very different rationale for ruthlessness than a “realist” estimation of the primacy and demands of political efficacy; it also represents a very different ethical dynamic. To embrace ruthlessness is to pass over certain limits on acceptable action. Many pragmatic proponents of *realpolitik*, and many idealistic proponents of reform or revolution who are swayed by consequentialist considerations, find themselves sliding gradually past the limits on acceptable action they might once have recognized. Absolutists of Lukacs's stripe, on the other hand, overstep ethical boundaries in a leap. Recognizing the difficulty of the fine discriminations between acceptable and unacceptable violations of ethical absolutes that trouble others, they choose to forgo such discrimination; if a purity of means proves impossible, they prefer the purity of devotion to ultimate ends, regardless of the price.

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<sup>370</sup> Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* 993; Lowy, 137, quoting Lukacs, *Soul and Form*, 31.

<sup>371</sup> Lukacs, *Record of a Life*, 63. This “Kierkegaardian” approach, which conceived of political commitment as premised on a “leap of faith” requiring complete fidelity once the decision had been made, also recalled Weber's insistence that science (or, in Lukacs's terms, reason) could not determine the ultimate ends to which one was committed. The commitment to politics that Weber bemoaned in Lukacs could be seen as the conclusion to Weber's own view of the nature of ethical commitment, and his ideal of ascetic dedication to a cause. But now, for Lukacs, “instrumental reason” became wholly subordinate to calculating the necessary means to serve that cause – rather than, as Weber suggested, weighing competing ethical considerations that might conflict with service to the cause.

Lukacs's intellectual radicalism, combined with the temper of the times, led him to embrace the confident, crusading *ethos* of Bolshevism. This ethos was embodied above all by Lenin, who represented a rare example of hopeful, successful revolutionary leadership in a crisis-torn world (and who came out of the Russian revolutionary-terrorist background by which Lukacs had been fascinated). Lukacs also encountered it in the form of Bela Kun, the Russian-picked leader of the Hungarian Communists, whom he met in late 1918. Kun struck Lukacs as a man “who *possesses the truth* ... For the first time, I have met someone in whom Hegel's dialectic has become flesh and blood, someone who truly *lives out* that about which we only prattle. He made it plain to me that I had never drawn the consequences of my ideas, but I will now do so.”<sup>372</sup> Kun argued that if one wanted the revolution to be *humane* (even though “there is for us no supra-class 'humanity'”) one must exercise dictatorship with “the utmost firmness and vigour ... unless we annihilate the counter-revolution, unless we wipe out those who rise up with guns against us, then it will be they who will murder us, massacre the proletariat, and leave us with no future at all.” A quick, brutal exercise of force was the best way to spare more people – and, more importantly perhaps, to spare the *right* people (the proletariat).<sup>373</sup> Faced with Kun's conviction, Lukacs seems to have been swayed to the position he had rejected in “Bolshevism as a Moral Problem”.

From Lukacs's attempts to explain and apply this conversion came the essay “Tactics and Ethics”. Lukacs distinguished between practitioners of “*realpolitik*”, who sought to achieve

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<sup>372</sup> Congdon 142, quoting the memoirs of Anna Lesznai.

<sup>373</sup> Kun, quoted Lowy, 140. The argument Kun advanced, and Lukacs accepted, was also voiced by Lenin; Rosa Luxemburg (who profoundly influenced Lukacs), notwithstanding her dissent from Lenin, agreed on this point: it was necessary to break the resistance of anti-socialist forces “with an iron fist”; the revolution “cannot shrink from any use of force” to secure the interests of the whole society. (Luxemburg, quoted Lukes op.cit., 103).

immediate advantages “within the given social reality”, and those *revolutionary* movements who pursued a transcendent “ultimate objective”. The latter sort of movement had to reject both opportunism (or compromise), and utopianism. On the one hand, political compromise obscured this ultimate purpose – and fostered a dangerous sense of solidarity with those who were, in fact, enemies of the proletariat, and thus, of liberation. On the other hand, it was folly to seek to impose ideals (such as democracy) directly on reality. Revolutionary politics must identify and exploit those forces already present and at work in society which could help to secure the realization of the ultimate objective. Tactics had to be determined by reflection on *both* the “irrevocable principles and objectives of communism”, and the “constantly changing historical reality”.<sup>374</sup>

While Lukacs insisted on the need for sensitivity to circumstances, he also attacked empiricism – and its political cousin, opportunism. Recognition of the “true reality” of historically necessary revolution meant paying “little attention to the so-called ‘facts.’” “Facts”, in their individuality, do not point to any particular course of action; only a sense of the larger *tendency* of which individual facts are instances can do that. Present facts can only be understood once related to their future outcome. And not just the *immediate* outcome.<sup>375</sup> What set Marxism apart from, and indeed against, reformism, was the time-frame it adopted. (Walter Benjamin captured this crucial strand of Lukacs's outlook when he observed that, Lukacs “thought in centuries”.<sup>376</sup>) Reformist socialists (or “opportunists”) saw the significance of the

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<sup>374</sup> “Tactics and Ethics”, TE 3-6, 9-10; “The Role of Morality in Communist Production”, TE 54; HCC 259, 22.

<sup>375</sup> It was this that led Lukacs to quote the words of Fichte: “So much the worse for the facts.” See “What is Orthodox Marxism?”, TE 22, 26-7; HCC 23.

<sup>376</sup> Quoted Kadarkay 326.

working-class's struggle in its immediate outcomes – better wages, shorter hours, more political heft. This made them, in effect, practitioners of *realpolitik*. The Marxist, in contrast, saw each step of the process as meaningful only in its relationship to the ultimate goal of revolution.

Adopting a holistic, dialectical standpoint, which grasped the true significance of each separate element through understanding its place within a larger historical “whole”, was necessary to save socialism from becoming a movement of incrementalist reform. This did not mean that Marxists should refuse to engage in immediate struggles; it meant, rather, seeing them as “revolutionary deeds”, whose meaning came from the larger totality of revolutionary struggle of which they are part.<sup>377</sup> This “holistic” approach was the key to Marxism's confidence and constancy. The Marxist “accepts all these disruptions and obstructions, but never allows them to distract him from his goal”; in “complete confidence and unshakeable faith” he awaits the verdict of history. The Marxian revolutionary could vary his tactics – and seemingly diverge from his principles – because his commitment to what really mattered was so unyielding. This meant that while Lukacs insisted on the importance of flexibility and adaptability in selecting means, he also insisted on the importance of theoretical “rigidity” – and a spirit of resoluteness.<sup>378</sup>

Alongside his argument for the superiority of the “science” or “method” of Marxist analysis, Lukacs advanced an *ethical* argument – one in which both his early moral absolutism, and the influence of Weber, are apparent. While Lukacs appeared to embrace a consequentialist

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<sup>377</sup> “What is Orthodox Marxism?”, 22; HCC 286. Such arguments recall Lionel Trilling's later attack on ideology: “it is characteristic of a well-developed ideology that it can diminish or destroy the primitive potency of fact. This is especially true when an ideology embodies, as Communism does, the idea of 'history', of process and progress – the fact of today, let alone of yesterday, becomes of no account before the adjustment and recompense that the future will bring.” Trilling, “Communism and Intellectual Freedom” [1958], in *idem.*, *Speaking of Literature and Society*, ed. Diana Trilling (1980), 302.

<sup>378</sup> “The Moral Mission of the Communist Party”, TE 65; “‘Law and Order’ and Violence”, *ibid.*, 47; “Tactics and Ethics”, 10; HCC 274, 288-90.

view which identified morality with the intelligent, effective pursuit of the ultimate end of revolution (“adherence to the correct tactics is itself ethical”<sup>379</sup>), he also stressed the importance of the conduct, character, and consciousness of the revolutionary activist – declaring that “[t]he only valid yardstick is whether the *manner* of the action in a given case serves to realize” the goal; and that “every activity”, no matter how quotidian, “*must be imbued with revolutionary spirit*”. This spirit was wholly dedicated to the cause of revolution, and was ready to make use of *every* opportunity to intensify class conflict.<sup>380</sup> The revolutionary cause demanded a change not only in institutions, but in the consciousness – the beliefs, values, and responses – of the proletariat. There was a need for a “moral transformation”, a “purging” or “cleansing” of the spirit of the “capitalist epoch” in order to attain a new order.<sup>381</sup>

The transformation which was at once the basis, means, and goal of revolutionary action was the formation of *class consciousness*. This was the self-consciousness of the proletariat as both the subject and the object, the actor and the end, of history – a consciousness which kept constantly in view the proletariat's “world-historical” mission.<sup>382</sup> Attaining class-consciousness meant not only “correct understanding of ... interests”, but also “the attainment of that *moral strength* which enables one to subordinate inclinations, emotions, and momentary whims to one's real interests.” If such a *moral* spirit did not emerge among the proletariat, it would be necessary

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<sup>379</sup> “Tactics and Ethics”, 6; see also *ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>380</sup> “Tactics and Ethics”, 5; “Opportunism and Putschism”, TE 76.

<sup>381</sup> “The Question of Parliamentarianism”, TE 63; “The Moral Mission of the Communist Party”, *ibid* 66, 70.

<sup>382</sup> “Intellectual Workers’ and the Problem of Intellectual Leadership”, TE 15n2; “Tactics and Ethics”, 9. See also HCC 46-81 *passim*.

to “create ... a legal order by means of which the proletariat compels its individual members ... to act in accordance with their own class interests.”<sup>383</sup>

Class consciousness served three purposes for Lukacs. First, it constituted the sole authoritative guide to action by the proletariat. For this reason, it was crucial to determine just *who* had attained – and represented – full class consciousness.<sup>384</sup> Second, the concept allowed Lukacs to reconcile the apparent contradictions between freedom and discipline. Class consciousness represented the real will of all members of the proletariat – one in which self-interest and morality were finally united in one and the same imperative. Individuals who had attained true class consciousness would freely will whatever served the interests of the proletariat, and the revolution (and thus, would all agree); those who disagreed could be forced to conform in the name of what they would will, had they attained class consciousness.<sup>385</sup>

Third, class consciousness served a crucial *ethical* purpose, in two respects: it provided a perspective from which action could be evaluated, and it conferred upon individuals a “moral strength” in undertaking action. Attaining such moral strength meant overcoming both the reflex to think of the interests of the individual as separate from or opposed to those of the class – and any internal hesitations or scruples that would cause individuals to recoil at the enormity of the task of revolution. The proletariat needed to throw off the intellectual “trammels” imposed upon it by bourgeois society, which prevented it from “lay[ing] hands on much that ought to be utterly

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<sup>383</sup> “The Role of Morality in Communist Production”, 50-51 As Deputy Commissar of Education Lukacs declared his aim to be that of “the revolutionizing of souls through re-education”; he would continue to insist that the Communist state should exercise strict censorship in order to mold the character of its members (Lukacs, quoted Livingstone, “Introduction”, TE xv; Kadarkay 225).

<sup>384</sup> See “Tactics and Ethics”, 9-10.

<sup>385</sup> HCC 50.

destroyed”, proceeding with the “labour of demolition and construction” with the “sense of assurance that springs from legitimate rule”.<sup>386</sup> As an *ethical* force, class consciousness was to become the guiding consciousness within each individual. The “ideal of the realm of freedom must ... be a conscious principle governing the actions and motivating the lives of all communist parties”; the “spirit of comradeship, of true solidarity, and of self-sacrifice” must govern everything the party did, while “[t]he individual's seriousness and sense of responsibility constitute a moral standard for every deed.”<sup>387</sup>

At the heart of Lukacs's account of revolutionary ethics lay an extraordinarily rigorous conception of responsibility. Each individual was responsible *for* his deeds, and *before* history. Any ethics worthy of the name rested on the “postulate” that the individual “must act as if on his action or inaction depended the changing of the world’s destiny, the approach of which is inevitably helped or hindered by the tactics he is about to adopt.” The excuse that “he is only an individual, on whom the fate of the world does not depend” carried no weight: for “[n]ot only can this not be known objectively for certain, because it is always possible that it will depend precisely on the individual, but this kind of thinking is also made impossible by the very essence of ethics, by conscience and the sense of responsibility.”<sup>388</sup> The burden of responsibility applied to *any* course of action, including inaction: “in the realm of ethics there is no neutrality and no impartiality”: he who fails to act is *responsible* for his inactivity. Each individual also bore responsibility for all of the *consequences* (intended or not) of his actions.<sup>389</sup> He who “opts” for

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 42, 314, 268

<sup>387</sup> “The Moral Mission of the Communist Party”, 69; “Tactics and Ethics”, 9.

<sup>388</sup> “Tactics and Ethics”, 8.

<sup>389</sup> Lukacs would apply this principle many years later when he wrote that “there is no such thing as an innocent



communism must “bear the same *individual* responsibility for each and every human being who dies for him in the struggle, as if he himself had killed them all.” This made moral guilt inevitable for adherents of Communism. But the same applied to the other side: those who “ally themselves to ... the defense of capitalism, must bear the same individual responsibility for the destruction entailed in the new imperialist revanchist wars which are surely imminent, and for the future oppression of the nationalities and classes.” From an ethical point of view, *everyone* was implicated in violence.<sup>390</sup>

The individual, choosing between two forms of guilt – dirtying his hands through engaging in a process of violence, or failing to contribute to the realization of the final goal because he refuses to dirty them – makes the correct choice “when he sacrifices his inferior self on the altar of the higher idea”. Murder is “an absolute and unpardonable sin; it 'may' not, but yet it 'must' be committed.” Terrorism cannot be *justified*; but it does have an “ultimate moral basis”: the “sacrifice for his brethren, not only of his life, but also of his purity, his morals, his very soul ... only he who acknowledges unflinchingly and without any reservations that murder is under no circumstances to be sanctioned can commit the murderous deed that is truly – and tragically – moral.” Such moral self-sacrifice was the only way to bridge the gulf between politics and

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standpoint in philosophy”: the fact that Bergson's ethics and philosophy of history “did not arrive at fascistic conclusions” was “completely unimportant” in assessing his “responsibility before mankind”, since Mussolini had developed fascist ideology from Bergson's ideas. That Bergson was not a fascist – or Spengler or Stefan George Nazis in their “personal tastes” – were “trifles”. (Preface to *The Dethroning of Reason*, 1954, quoted A) *Life in Pictures and Documents*, 218).

<sup>390</sup> “Tactics and Ethics”, 8. However much the contemporary reader may be repelled by the conclusions Lukacs ultimately drew, many today continue to feel – often obscurely – that they bear some personal responsibility in relation to the various injustices, cruelties and man-made disasters permeating the world. While the nature of this responsibility and of the duties it imposes remain matters of obscurity, I cannot regard this intuition as simply harmful or wholly unfounded – if for no better reason than that I share it.

ethics. It was thus the imperative of any *political* ethics: “Both the politician and the revolutionary must sacrifice the soul in order to save it.”<sup>391</sup>

As he had during his early, “ethical” phase, Lukacs invoked the example of Russian terrorism as a model of this ethic of tragic morality. The Russian terrorists never claimed that the ends justified the means: murder was always a crime. Their insistence on acknowledging that their crimes *were* crimes – their “conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder”<sup>392</sup> – was another manifestation of responsibility and self-sacrifice: the sacrifice of their own moral purity, for the greater good of others.<sup>393</sup> A sense of blood-drenched guilt became a badge of moral honor; the sense of having committed a crime was itself a sign of sanctity. “Sin”, Lukacs concluded, could sometimes be an “integral and inescapable part of the right action”, while “ethical *limits* ... could sometimes be an *obstacle* to the right action.”<sup>394</sup> Or as Commissar Lukacs told his troops, “terror and bloodshed are a moral duty, or, more plainly, our virtue”<sup>395</sup>

Lukacs's insistence on the genuine evil of murder was thus transmuted into a rationale for embracing murder. Furthermore, as one of Lukacs' most intimate friends noted privately, “Individual ethics ... has taken us to the point where we identify ourselves with a movement that

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<sup>391</sup> “Tactics and Ethics”, 10-11; Lukacs quoted Kadarkay 186. Tellingly, in speaking of the need to sacrifice one’s soul for the service of humanity, Lukacs used the Italian phrase – “sacrificio dell’anima” – thus revealing the influence of Machiavelli (Eva Karadi, “Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukacs in Max Weber's Heidelberg”, *Max Weber and His Contemporaries*, 508).

<sup>392</sup> W. H. Auden, “Spain” (1937), in Auden, *Selected Poems* ed. Edward Mendelson (Vintage, 2007), 57.

<sup>393</sup> See Congdon, 103. In this respect, Lukacs’ position was actually close to that espoused by Camus in *The Just Assassins*” and *The Rebel*– and more recently, by Michael Walzer in “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands”.

<sup>394</sup> Lukacs, *Gelebtes Denken: Ein Autobiographie im Dialog* (written 1971), quoted Lowy 136.

<sup>395</sup> Jozsef Lengyel's report of Lukacs's speech to his troops, quoted Kadarkay, 222.

excludes individual ethics ... If we renounce our ethics, this will be our most 'ethical' deed.”<sup>396</sup> Indeed, this element of Lukacs's thought represented a sort of holdover from his early, “ethical” phase, in its emphasis on the political actors' intentions and self-understanding – indeed, the condition of her soul – as well as on consequences; it seemed, at times, as if the degree of inner conviction and resignation to guilt was a more important criterion for judging an actor or action, than consequences.<sup>397</sup>

At the same time, this highly individual-centered perspective demanded that individuals shift their attention *away* from themselves; it was not a prescription for self-scrutiny. To truly, properly will the destruction of oppressive, unjust society was to give oneself wholly over to the cause – to come to regard oneself as a mere means to its achievement.<sup>398</sup> This ethos of self-abnegation could also encourage acceptance of cruel injustices. Meeting Stephen Spender in the safety of Switzerland in 1946, Lukacs and his wife asked the British poet why he had abandoned Communism, Spender replied that he objected to the concentration camps. To this Gertrud Lukacs replied, “Oh, we were always so grateful when our friends were sent to the re-education camps”. Her son had recently returned from the Gulag, his fingers frostbitten.<sup>399</sup>

Lukacs's arrival at this point reflected his understanding, not only of the demands of moral responsibility, but of the ethical role of the Communist Party. For Lukacs, the Party was

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<sup>396</sup> Bela Balasz, “Notes from a Diary”, quoted Lowy 136.

<sup>397</sup> Lukacs would later, under the influence of the “orthodox” Marxism of Lenin and Stalin, disavow such subjectivism.

<sup>398</sup> Thus, after the failure of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, Lukacs considered suicide – but realized that “I didn't have the right to do this: a member of the Central Committee must set an example” (Victor Serge, quoted *A Life in Pictures and Documents*, 115).

<sup>399</sup> Kadarkay 383.

“the historical embodiment and active incarnation” of “the really revolutionary and fully class-conscious workers” – and thus also the “incarnation of the ethics of the fighting proletariat”. This conception of the Party's role reflected the unique, urgent circumstances of the present period of revolutionary upheaval. The closer the process of transition from capitalism to communism came to its goal, the more urgent it was for action to be guided by a correct understanding of the proletariat's mission. With history hurtling forward at increased speed, a firm hand was needed at the wheel.<sup>400</sup> The Party was uniquely epistemically privileged: it alone represented “knowledge of society in its totality”, and thus its judgment superseded that of any individual. It must therefore be able to *lead* authoritatively: for it could only “fulfill its destiny in this conflict if it is always a step in front of the struggling masses, to show them the way.”<sup>401</sup>

This required the Party to maintain a high level of ideological (in effect, moral) purity and exclusivity, so as to guard against “corruption and compromise”. Such purity was necessary, not only to keep to a focused, unified course of political action, but to effect inward transformation – to tear away the “reified veils that cloud the consciousness of the individual in capitalist society.”<sup>402</sup> This moral transformation required that Party members be completely dedicated to and absorbed in its efforts. (Describing the discipline of its members demanded by the modern party “machine”, Weber has written of the need for the membership's “spiritual proletarianisation”;<sup>403</sup> the phrase applies doubly well to Lukacs's account of the Party – insofar

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<sup>400</sup> HCC 42; “The Moral Mission of the Communist Party”, TE 66. See also HCC 69-70.

<sup>401</sup> *Lenin: A Study of the Unity of His Thought*, trans Nicholas Jacobs (MIT Press, 1971), 26, 34; “The Moral Mission of the Communist Party”, TE 69.

<sup>402</sup> “The Moral Mission of the Communist Party”, 67-8, 69; HCC 339. See also Mueller, *Contesting Democracy*, 74.

<sup>403</sup> “Politics as a Vocation”, 351.

as he required both the discipline of which Weber had written, *and* the adoption of all members of the Party of the “consciousness”, or spirit, of the proletariat.) To assent to the aims of Communism required that one become a Communist; and truly becoming a Communist meant “active personal participation ... constant, day-to-day collaboration” in “the work of revolution.” Such participation could “only be achieved by engaging the whole personality. Only when action within a community becomes the central personal concern of everyone involved will it be possible to abolish the split between rights and duties, the organizational form of man's separation from his own socialization and his fragmentation at the hands of the social forces that control him.”<sup>404</sup>

### **C. Total Politics, True Freedom, and Lukacs's Ethic of Revolutionary Realism**

In making this argument, Lukacs came to invoke not only the requirements of a revolutionary period, but a new theory of politics – that of “proletarian democracy”. One of this theory's “fundamental ideas” was that “politics is a matter touching directly upon the whole life of every human being ... the starting-point for everyone concerning every question is *tua res agitur*, it's your business.” This “democratic” view was opposed to “aristocratic” or anti-democratic ideologies (such as Existentialism) that saw public life as a “hostile sphere” and private life as a haven for the individual.<sup>405</sup>

This account of “democracy”, read with the benefit of hindsight, seems all too easily to point to an apologia for Stalinism. But the theoretical groundwork on which it rested had been developed by Lukacs in a strenuous attempt to reconcile the demands of revolutionary politics

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<sup>404</sup> HCC 316, 319; see also *ibid* 335-7.

<sup>405</sup> Lukacs [1946], quoted in *A Life in Pictures and Documents*, 184, 191.

with the ideal of *freedom*. Lukacs's thought was shaped around a conception of freedom as “the *activity* of the members of a collective will, closely integrated and collaborating in a spirit of solidarity.” Freedom could thus be realized only in action – and in meaningful action, in concert with others. The “fully developed communist society” would be “the first society in the history of mankind” that “takes individual freedom seriously and makes it a reality”. This meant the ultimate disappearance of bourgeois freedom – a freedom “of the egoist, of the man who cuts himself off from others”, and enjoys his own freedom at their expense. To achieve a *truly* free society required the destruction of the liberal *ideal* of freedom, and of the institutions supporting it, through the “conscious subordination of the self to that collective will that is destined to bring real freedom into being” – that is, the Party. Individual freedom threatened to turn the Party into a “loose aggregate of individuals incapable of action.” Such a condition not only hampered the achievement of a truly free society; it also prevented the *individual members* of the Party from achieving the freedom of productive action guided by the collective will. Thus, only through the discipline of the Communist Party could the individual “hope to obtain freedom *for himself too*”.<sup>406</sup>

While Lukacs invoked freedom as a value justifying the actions of the Party, he also insisted that, in the period of revolutionary change, freedom “*must serve the rule of the proletariat, not the other way around*”; it must be “*given a revolutionary and not a counter-revolutionary function*”. To Rosa Luxemburg's defense of the “rights of freedom” against the Bolsheviks – “Freedom is always freedom for the one who thinks differently” – Lukacs responded that such freedom meant “freedom for the other 'currents' of the workers' movement:

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<sup>406</sup> HCC 315-16, 320, 337.

for the Mensheviks, and the Socialist Revolutionaries.” In the “age of the dictatorship of the proletariat”, the attitude adopted by the revolutionary toward “the so-called problems of freedom” depended “entirely on whether he regards *the Mensheviks as the enemies of the revolution*”, or as allies who merely had a “divergent opinion in isolated questions of tactics and organization.” Lukacs rejected the latter analysis.<sup>407</sup>

Lenin (who would condemn *History and Class Consciousness*) had made much the same point about democracy, as had Plekhanov and Trotsky.<sup>408</sup> As in their cases, Lukacs's argument reflected a larger *Manicheanism*, which conceived of the political landscape in terms of a life-and-death struggle between implacably opposed forces, one wholly good, the other wholly evil – and thus identified all elements that opposed one's own side with the side of evil.<sup>409</sup> The world, in Lukacs's eyes, was divided between the contending forces of socialism and capitalism. Anything that weakened or hampered socialism in its struggle aided capitalism; any criticism of actually existing socialism could be exploited by the enemy for its purposes. For this reason, fellow-socialists who opposed the Communist Party or the Soviet Union – the true agent of socialist revolution – were to be identified with the forces of reaction; the correctness of the

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<sup>407</sup> HCC 290, 292.

<sup>408</sup> E.g. Lenin's declaration, in 1919, that “we shall not allow ourselves to be deceived by such high-sounding slogans as freedom, equality and the will of the majority ... all those who ... talk about 'freedom' in general, who in the name of this freedom oppose the dictatorship of the proletariat, are doing nothing more nor less than aiding and abetting the exploiters” (*Works* Vol 29 [March-August 1919], 351-2; Vol 28 [July 1918-March 1919], 447; quoted Kolakowski 761-2, 746). Indeed, Lenin went so far as to declare that to tolerate the existence of non-Bolshevik papers was “to cease being a socialist” (*Works* 26, 285, quoted Kolakowski 761). See also *ibid.*, 944-5; Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, 160-61; Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*, 20.

<sup>409</sup> See e.g. Trotsky's claim that the Communists were engaged in a “life and death struggle”, which required the use of every means of power without scruple: “Who aims at the end cannot reject the means.” “The struggle” had to be carried on by all the methods at the Party's disposal, and “with such intensity as actually to guarantee the supremacy of the proletariat. If the socialist revolution requires dictatorship ... it follows that the dictatorship must be guaranteed at all cost” (*Democracy vs. Dictatorship*, 61-2, 22).

Party against its rivals was an axiomatic point.<sup>410</sup> The rise of fascism – and, later, the Soviet Union’s conflict with Nazi Germany (at least after the Hitler-Stalin Pact was violently voided by Hitler) – made it all the easier for Lukacs to embrace a Manichean picture of a struggle between absolute barbarism and heroic humanism.

Lukacs may have become a Marxist partly for the sake of the security of an iron-cast intellectual structure. But his embrace of Communism, and his repeated bending to the Party's will, were also undertaken for the sake of not falling into despair in the face of an evil that threatened his world and hopes. He felt the need to enlist in the fight against reaction; and he believed that total fealty to the Communist Party – which appeared to him the only adequate vehicle for this fight – justified any degree of self-abnegation, hypocrisy, and dishonesty.<sup>411</sup>

The effects of Lukacs's Manichean outlook are reflected in his response to Stalinism. Lukacs spent the 1920s deeply involved in the Hungarian Communist party-in-exile in Vienna, and in debates over the political tactics of the German Communist Party. In 1930 he was called to Moscow, where he would remain until the end of World War II. With the exception of a few months spent in the infamous Lubyanka prison, he largely avoided Stalin's purges; but he spent much of the time in enforced seclusion from politics. The details of his career throughout the worst years of Stalinism are still obscure. Many (including Brecht) came to regard Lukacs as a

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<sup>410</sup> See e.g. HCC 293.

<sup>411</sup> See Kadarkay, 316; Kolakowski, 1029; Istvan Mészáros, *Lukacs' Concept of the Dialectic*, 76-84; Congdon, 173-4; Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: A Historical Study of Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno*, 142; Mueller, *Contesting Democracy*, 75.



“hack” serving a Stalinist “clique”; and he did his best to cultivate powerful friends, and disassociate himself from those (such as Bukharin) who fell from favor.<sup>412</sup>

Such actions were demanded by simple self-preservation. But Lukacs (who had shown remarkable physical courage during the Hungarian Revolution) offered a different – and probably a sincere – rationale. From early on, he had recognized the purges as dubiously legal. But this was beside the point: they were historically necessary. His position “fundamentally changed” when he recognized that the campaign to eradicate Trotskyism could only result in the mass condemnation of innocent people. Yet he felt he could not voice his opposition – not only because of the “physical impossibility” of such action, but also the “moral one”: the fact that the Soviet Union faced a “life-and-death struggle” with fascism. In such conditions, “a convinced communist could not but say: ‘Right or wrong, my party.’”<sup>413</sup>

Lukacs's response to Stalinism reflected another implication of Manicheanism: the embrace of a moral double-standard, which applied very different moral criteria to actions of the Party and those of its opponents. Such a response was suggested by Marxism itself, with its view of moral evaluations as necessarily class-specific. All morality was class-morality; and the actions of different classes were not to be evaluated by the same standards, because their

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<sup>412</sup> See Kadarkay 325, 345.

<sup>413</sup> Quoted in *A Life in Pictures and Documents*. In conversation with Victor Serge, Lukacs insisted on the need for Communists to suppress disagreement with the leadership. Such individual dissent was an expression of personal “pride”; what was needed was “patience and courage”, a reserving of strength until the time was ripe, and the revolutionary intellectual was summoned by history (Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* [Oxford University Press, 1963], 192). Even after Khrushchev's “secret speech”, Lukacs maintained that, while victims of Stalin who had been falsely accused should be absolved of those crimes – but not of their justly condemned “political errors” (“Reflections on the Cult of Stalin”, in Lukacs, *Marxism and Human Liberation*, ed. E. San Juan, Jr. [Dell, 1973], 64).

historical roles were utterly different.<sup>414</sup> Lukacs embraced this outlook, holding that White terror was “the desperate measure of a desperate class taken in order to confound the verdict of history”, while Red terror was constructive “humanism.”<sup>415</sup> In post-World War II Hungary, when Lukacs excused the Gulag as a “historical necessity”, one of his students retorted “What use is faith if it is tied to a lie?” Lukacs, after a long pause, replied that one must distinguish between “hateful” and “excusable” gulags. Such statements reflected Lukacs's faith that “even at its worst, it is better to live under socialism than under the best of capitalism” (to which Kolakowski responded, “Ah yes, the advantages of Albania over Switzerland are self-evident”<sup>416</sup>).

Such reasoning, and the judgment of Stalinism to which it led, were far from being unique to Lukacs. Merleau-Ponty, for example, charged that in situations of war and revolution, “tolerance amounts to weakness”; opposition becomes treason when “the very existence of popular regimes is in question”. “To go against Stalin” was in effect “joining the camp of the enemies of socialism and the Soviet Union, going over to the Fascist camp.” Furthermore, whoever merely “protects the accused in the Moscow Trials makes himself the accomplice of every one of the present attacks launched by Fascism against peace and against the workers of the whole world.” For “in a period of revolutionary tension or external threat there is no clear-cut boundary between political divergences and objective treason. Humanism is suspended and

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<sup>414</sup> E.g. Trotsky's claim that it was appropriate to apply “different criteria to the actions of the exploiters and the exploited”: “History has different yardsticks for the cruelty of the Northerners and the cruelty of the Southerners in the Civil War. A slave-owner who through cunning and violence shackles a slave in chains, and a slave who through cunning or violence breaks the chains – let not the contemptible eunuchs tell us that they are equals before a court of morality!” (“Their Morals and Ours”, 169, 170).

<sup>415</sup> Kadarkay 248.

<sup>416</sup> Lukacs quoted Kadarkay, 327; Kolakowski quoted Mueller, *Contesting Democracy*, 265n.157.

government is terror.” How far Merleau-Ponty adopted a Manichean outlook (while attacking liberals for *their* Manicheanism) is evident in his conclusion that any criticism of Communism which failed to “‘understand’ these rival societies in their totality” – that is, which did not take a Marxist starting-point – could only serve to threaten the USSR. and disguise the evils of capitalism; thus any such critique “should be regarded as an act of war.”<sup>417</sup>

This picture of an absolutely good, and obligatory, cause, and an absolutely evil enemy, was a recipe for embracing ruthlessness, and with it, an ethos of “realism”. This, combined with the subordination of particulars to the “whole”, allowed Lukacs to dismiss doubts and remain silent on follies and atrocities. Indeed, it did not merely allow, but *compelled* him to do so.

From almost as soon as he embraced Communism (and thus, well before Stalin's ascension to supremacy), Lukacs's political writings divulge an ongoing dialectic between “realist” and “idealist” tendencies. Thus, Lukacs praised Lenin's “realistic toughness”<sup>418</sup> and Hegel's “splendid realism”, his “rejection of every utopia”,<sup>419</sup> and attacked the “Romantic Utopianism, ideological exaggeration and the crusading spirit” of morally purist intellectuals.<sup>420</sup> But we also find him, around the same time (1922), circling back and proclaiming the superiority of utopian revolt over “reconciliation” and the “spirit of compromise and philistinism.”<sup>421</sup> A few years later, Lukacs was charging that Hegel's “realism, his rejection of all forms of Utopia”, was the “limitation” that led him to an increasingly reactionary position.

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<sup>417</sup> *Humanism and Terror*, 30-32, 34, 180.

<sup>418</sup> HCC 269.

<sup>419</sup> Quoted Congdon, 149.

<sup>420</sup> “Tagore's Gandhi Novel”, in Lukacs, *Reviews and Articles from "Die Rote Fahne"*. (Merlin Press, 1983), 10.

<sup>421</sup> Quoted Lowy 172.

Yet in the same essay he attacked Moses Hess as an “ethical Utopian”, who bolstered his “moralistic idealism” with “wildly mythological” theories;<sup>422</sup> in the same year he attacked Toller for “abstract and romantic utopianism.”<sup>423</sup>

Lukacs's increasing, if uneasy, “realism” reflected Lenin's criticisms of his earlier, “idealistic” writings; but it also reflected the pressure of events – and of Lukacs's particular vantage-point as a participant in them. As a leading figure in the Hungarian Soviet Republic and later the Communist underground, Lukacs had to “face decisions whose ... long-term and immediate consequences I could not ignore and which I had to make the basis of yet further decisions.”<sup>424</sup> Faced with personal responsibilities, Lukacs – like Weber – came to speak against the romanticism of those who looked to a single transformative moment.<sup>425</sup> But, Lukacs warned, the danger to Communism came not only from the romanticism of the putschists, but from the “opportunists” who advocated gradualist means.

In embracing realism, Lukacs devoted himself to expounding an ethical ideal of revolutionary character and outlook. In his book on Lenin (1924), Lukacs presented an extended paean to Lenin as the embodiment of a “new form of exemplary attitude to reality”. Lenin's exemplary qualities included “theoretical clarity” as well as “lucid awareness” of emerging realities, “sober simplicity”, “readiness and constancy,” and lack of vanity. Lenin “never became

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<sup>422</sup> “Moses Hess and the Problem of Idealist Dialectics”, TE 191-2, 222.

<sup>423</sup> “Art for Art's Sake and Proletarian Poetry” [1926], quoted Lowy, 194.

<sup>424</sup> “Preface” (1967), HCC xiv-xv.

<sup>425</sup> “Opportunism and Putschism”, TE 71.

a political Utopian; he also never had any illusions about the human material around him”; and the aim of Lenin's “realpolitik” was the “the final elimination of all utopianism”.<sup>426</sup>

This revolutionary ethic was not only realistic, but ruthless. Lukacs depicted Lenin as being marked by a balance of such ruthlessness with a degree of compassion and regret (he quoted the great man exclaiming “We must hit people mercilessly on the head, even when we are ideally against any violence between men. Oh! our work is hellishly difficult!”). Lenin accepted the necessity of personal guilt – but his acceptance was calm rather than anguished; it did not for a moment affect his judgment of what needed to be done. And in commenting on Lenin, Lukacs himself urged the necessity of ruthlessness: for “In the interests of the further progress of the revolution ... it is necessary for *the proletariat to use all the means at its disposal to keep the power of the state in its own hands under all circumstances.*” For, “the more ruthless” the proletariat was, “the greater the victory”.<sup>427</sup>

Such passages, brutal as they may be, reflect an underlying moral ardor. As we have seen, Lukacs's stress on discipline and responsibility was tied to an ethic of revolutionary moral self-sacrifice, in which willingness to engage in ruthless action became in itself a sign of higher probity and scrupulousness. In contrast, moderation – the policies of the “parties of so-called democratic reform” – constituted a failure to “fight seriously enough”, *even for liberal-democratic principles*.<sup>428</sup> The hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of liberalism served to vindicate the ruthlessness of Communism.

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<sup>426</sup> *Lenin*, 5, 36, 72, 90-92, 97. (I have here quoted both from Lukacs's 1924 text, and his 1967 postscript).

<sup>427</sup> *Lenin*, 91; HCC 292 (emphasis added), 68.

<sup>428</sup> *Blum Theses 1928-1929*, TE 240.

So did the embers of utopian aspiration. Writing under Stalin's dictatorship in 1943 – in the midst of a war against fascism that would see, among so many other horrors, the destruction of Hungarian Jewry – Lukacs could still write

The golden age: genuine and harmonious relations between genuine and harmonious men. Dostoevsky's characters know that this is a dream in the present age but they cannot and will not abandon the dream. They cannot abandon the dream even when most of their feelings sharply contradict it. This dream is the truly genuine core, the real gold of Dostoevsky's utopias; a state of the world in which men may know and love each other, in which culture and civilization will not be an obstacle to the development of men.<sup>429</sup>

#### **D. Conclusion**

The comparison of Lukacs's arguments, and their implications in action, to those of Weber allows us to better make sense of the moral terrain first surveyed in the Introduction – a terrain which subsequent critics and defenders of liberalism would continue to traverse and battle over. For the young Lukacs, the ethic of “goodness” provided a rationale for dirtying one's hands: the purity of intention overcame the corruption inherent in action. On the other hand, in “Bolshevism as a Moral Problem”, Lukacs insisted that good could not come of evil. Purity of means, rather than purity of intention, was needed. In both cases, Lukacs rejected a purely consequentialist reasoning. It was in turning to Communism that Lukacs acknowledged that – as Weber insisted – “action that springs from the purest ethical source can, from a tactical point of view, be completely mistaken”; at this point, Lukacs also stressed the *responsibility* of the individual to act *as if* his actions would contribute to the realization of the ultimate outcome of historical struggle, even if this could not be known.<sup>430</sup> Thus, while Lukacs's case may seem to

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<sup>429</sup> “Dostoevsky” (trans. Rene Welleck), in *Marxism and Human Liberation*, 196-7.

<sup>430</sup> “Tactics and Ethics”, 7.

bear out elements of Weber's critique of the “ethic of conviction”, his embrace of Communism deployed arguments close to Weber's own.

Lukacs also acknowledged – at least initially – that the decision in favor of Communism was an act of faith, the sort of willed dedication to a cause of which Weber wrote. Yet Weber himself resisted the sort of leap of faith that Lukacs now took: he sought to maintain that poise, distance and sobriety, that capacity of “judgment”, that he identified as crucial to politics – as well as that freedom of intellect from doctrine that he identified as crucial to the vocation of the intellectual. If Lukacs drew on arguments and ideas from his teacher, his ultimate conclusion was a disavowal of much of the personal *ethos* to which Weber was dedicated: that of sober fortitude and the modesty of “purposive rationality” in the face of a tragic condition which offered no hopes of salvation. Lukacs retained the aspiration toward purity and absolutes, even as he accepted arguments for consequentialist calculation in political decision. This combination drew him to embrace end-maximalism, according to which ruthless action and compromise were redeemed by both the agent's dedication, and the action's contribution, to the “pure” cause.

Lukacs's case thus points to both the dangers to liberal politics of some elements of Weber's account of political ethics – and the importance of other elements in both Weber's conception of politics, and of the *ethos* appropriate to political action, in protecting against those dangers. Weber himself linked his disagreement with Lukacs' choice to both the virtue or disposition of realism, connected to self-knowledge, and to the idea of a “calling”. Writing to Lukacs after the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, he sought to explain why he thought his young friend so grievously wrong: “I am absolutely convinced that these experiments *can* only have and will have the consequence of discrediting socialism for the coming 100 years”. Aside

from that, there was also the question of Lukacs' own calling. “Understandably”, Lukacs claimed the “sole right to decide about that”. And yet, “whenever I think of *what* the present (since 1918) political goings-on cost us in terms of *unquestionably* valuable people, regardless of the 'direction' of their choice, e.g. Schumpeter and now you, without being able to see an end to all that, and, in my opinion, without achieving anything ... I cannot help feeling bitter about this senseless fate” – a fate in which Lukacs was a fugitive, and “everything will be reactionary for decades to come.”<sup>431</sup>

By that point, Lukacs was deaf to such arguments. After his conversion to Communism, Lukacs wrote to Marianne Weber that any further contact with Weber could only be like that of Gyges and Candaules – former friends who were condemned to destroy each other.<sup>432</sup> While he movingly expressed personal sorrow over Weber's death,<sup>433</sup> his public career bore out this analysis. During World War II, Lukacs would attack Weber, and other figures exemplifying German “humanism”, for “preparing the ground for German barbarism”. This was not their intent; but “In history ... it is not the human intent which is decisive but the objective results.”<sup>434</sup> Lukacs – one of the objects of Weber’s argument in favor of an ethic of responsibility against an

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<sup>431</sup> Weber to Lukacs, [March?] 1920, in *Lukacs: Selected Correspondence*, 281-2. Weber added “let me know *how* one *can* be of help to you. (I did not sign the recent public 'appeal' because I had written earlier to the Ministry of Justice in Budapest on your behalf and noted there that I would *not* join any public action.)”

<sup>432</sup> Karadi 509. Weber however did not give up, continuing to urge Lukacs to abandon politics for scholarship. Lukacs would eventually do just that – but at the dictate of Stalin rather than the urging of Weber.

<sup>433</sup> “The thought terrifies me that the distance ... erected between us in the last years cannot be removed anymore. I've always found the fact of separation ... stupid, senseless and a mere empirical necessity. I knew that one could remove all that separates us with a few words, talking man to man ... and now one can never speak those words anymore. It has always been among the few hopeful thoughts which nurtured my human existence that the day would come when I'll sit down and talk with Max Weber. The number of people whose judgment about the human condition in which we live – whether we do the right thing or not – is so small, that one almost gives up this *Gemeinschaft* and freezes into solitude.” Lukacs to Marianne Weber, in *Selected Correspondence*, 283.

<sup>434</sup> Quoted Kadarkay 345.



ethic of conviction – now invoked the criterion of responsibility for results to condemn Weber.

We have now explored two very different – though not wholly different – responses to the crisis of liberalism in the early twentieth century which arose out of the particular context of the German philosophical tradition, fertilized by a combination of the Hegelian critique of the “beautiful soul”, the “Machiavellian” tradition of *Realpolitik*, and the explorations in moral absolutism of Russian thinkers and revolutionaries. We have seen how Weber and Lukacs were preoccupied with “ethical” concerns – both the questions of political ethics and the phenomenon of *ethos* as a decisive factor in politics; we have also seen how each was simultaneously drawn to the poles of absolutism and moral purism, and a concern with practical consequences that seemed to demand ruthlessness. In both we have noted a tendency toward *intellectual* extremism as a matter of temperament – though in Weber's case this tendency was tempered both by commitment to liberal values, and to personal ideals of sobriety, modesty, and judgment. Both men sought to work out a personal response to the conflicting moral demands and intuitions by which they were assailed – one which would also serve as the basis for a political ethic. Both, in their different ways, articulated *ascetic* ethics, stressing the need for discipline and sacrifice – and, to varying degrees, “hardness”.

Yet the differences in their aspirations, tempers, and intellectual ethics proved politically decisive. Lukacs sought complete transformation – the creation or restoration of a harmonious (or homogenous) whole; Weber accepted, and indeed embraced, division and conflict. He sought a way to preserve individual freedom and integrity within an irrational – yet rationalizing – world; Lukacs was ready to sacrifice individual freedom and intellectual integrity for the sake of

transforming the world, and thus eradicating this alienation of self from world.<sup>435</sup> In the process, however, he inflicted a grievous alienation on himself. Moved by idealistic and compassionate moral impulse, he embraced ruthlessness; moved by a dream of freedom and egalitarian harmony, he justified hierarchic discipline and oppression; and, driven on by a skeptical, questioning, very individual intelligence, he forced himself into a structure – a “steel casing”, as it were – of dogma. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (grappling with, and coming to partially reject, similar elements in his own earlier thought) wrote in 1949, Lukacs represented “the way [in which] communist historical responsibility turns into naked discipline, self-criticism into renunciation, and Marxism into superstition.”<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>435</sup> Karadi 510.

<sup>436</sup> Quoted Kadarkay, 408.

### **Chapter 3. A Dead Man on Holiday:** **Arthur Koestler on the Ethos of Revolutionary Morality**

Lukacs's journey from romantic idealist to dogged defender of Stalinism is dramatic, and the shifting arguments about political ethics that he deployed to justify his positions revealing; yet, with much of his inner experience deliberately obscured, his motivations remain elusive. One of the most vivid depictions of the reasoning and the psychological workings underlying anti-liberal ruthlessness would be presented, in fictionalized form, by another Hungarian Jewish veteran of the Communist movement. Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940) is a document of the first importance in gaining a full picture of the reasoning and psyche of those who embraced the cause of revolution – and thus, repudiated the morality of liberalism –in the “Red Decade” of the 1930s: a decade which witnessed both many of the bloodiest moments of Soviet Communism, and the most acute crisis of liberalism's confidence and plausibility. *Darkness at Noon* reflects the mindset and supplements the arguments of Lenin, Trotsky, and Lukacs; it also offers the beginning of a liberal response to the mode of politics they represent, pointing to some of the errors and perversities of the ethos of political ruthlessness, and some of the ethical resources on which an alternative political ethic can be built.

Koestler himself is a representative figure of his time: a classic product of *Mitteleuropa*, the first four decades of his life constituted a pilgrimage through the major ideological alternatives of the time (he called himself “the Cassanova of causes”). By the time he came to write *Darkness at Noon* in 1940 he had broken with Communism; and the Koestler of the 1940s and early '50s may be identified with anti-Communist liberalism.<sup>437</sup> But liberalism was not an

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<sup>437</sup>The “Manifesto of Freedom” (1950), largely drafted by Koestler for the founding of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) is as good a statement of mid-century liberal principles as one could find.

ideology that held Koestler's imagination for long; he was not personally suited to it. Koestler was an extremist: often in position, always in temperament.<sup>438</sup> He was always seeking “all-embracing explanations”, taking one “leap of faith” after another<sup>439</sup> – in contrast to the liberal ethos, which was largely defined by its refusal of such leaps. If, for a time, Koestler came to embrace a position of passionate moderation and determined skepticism – and to do so with characteristic eloquence and pathos – it was because he was all-too-well-acquainted with the tensions that drove political idealists to make such leaps, and the moral abyss into which such leaps led. Through the medium of the novel Koestler was able to present much of the critique of totalitarian radicalism that would form part of the intellectual arsenal of post-war liberalism – in a way that makes the reader see, and to some degree even share, the assumptions, commitments, and deformities of the totalitarian mind. As such, his work provided important insight and inspiration for the liberal response to anti-liberal ethics; yet Koestler ultimately could not offer a fully convincing depiction of a positive alternative to the anti-liberal mindset he portrayed so well.

*Darkness at Noon* tells the story of N. S. Rubashov's imprisonment, interrogation, and ultimate confession to crimes he has not committed during the Great Purge of 1938 (Koestler is thus addressing, not the revolutionary violence in which Lukacs was embroiled, but the

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<sup>438</sup> Raymond Aron, an admirer, noted Koestler's “militant temperament” (Aron, “A Writer's Greatness”, *Encounter* July 1983, 11). This temperament – accompanied by fiery rhetoric and plain bad manners – alienated Koestler from the more moderate elements who came to control the CCF, which Koestler had done so much to launch.

<sup>439</sup> Tony Judt, “Arthur Koestler, the Exemplary Intellectual”, in Tony Judt, *Reappraisals* (Penguin, 2008), 26; the same picture emerges from the more admiring account of Sidney Hook, “Cold Warrior”, *Encounter* July 1983, 12-15.

institutionalization of an anti-liberal regime through a sort of parody of liberal legalism).<sup>440</sup> The novel has often been read as a proposed solution to the psychological mystery of why the Old Bolsheviks – Bukharin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Radek, Rakovsky, et al. – agreed to make false confessions.<sup>441</sup> Koestler posited a psychological drama in which the centrality of the revolutionary cause to the identities and hopes of the veteran revolutionaries led them to remain loyal to the Party after it had betrayed them. The narrative is concerned, on one level, with the psychology, ethics, and *Weltanschauung* of professional revolutionists – those “dead men on holiday”<sup>442</sup> who lived for and perished by the revolution. Koestler's attempts to understand the psychology of Communist agents, those “young idealists flirting with violence”, with their mixture of “idealism, naivete, and unscrupulousness”,<sup>443</sup> led him to consider the relationship of political power and private morality, revolutionary striving and personal identity, the movement and the individual, means and ends. The book bears witness to Koestler's absorption in the problem of “dirty hands”; the epigraph of its first chapter is Saint-Just's declaration that “One cannot rule guiltlessly”.<sup>444</sup>

Koestler's anti-Communist arguments rested on a critique of the combination of ruthlessness and fanatical conviction that he saw as central to Communism's motives, methods,

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<sup>440</sup> I am grateful to Nancy Rosenblum for highlighting this point.

<sup>441</sup> The characterization of Rubashov drew on Trotsky, his erstwhile opponent Bukharin, and Trotsky's ally Radek; but Koestler's account of Rubashov's imprisonment by the Soviet state drew on his own imprisonment by Franco's forces during the Spanish Civil War, as well as the experiences of his friend Eva Weissberg as a prisoner of the Soviet secret police (Koestler, contribution to Crossman et. al., *The God that Failed* [TGTF], 70).

<sup>442</sup> *Darkness at Noon* (New York: Scribner, 2006 [1940]), 32.

<sup>443</sup> TGTF, 37.

<sup>444</sup> *Darkness at Noon*, 1. One of the book's two epigraphs is from Machiavelli: “He who establishes a dictatorship and does not kill Brutus, or he who founds a republic and does not kill the sons of Brutus, will only reign a short time.” (*Discourses on Livy*, III.3).

and mystique. The USSR was guided by “power politics”, necessarily “opportunist and cynical”, sacrificing ethical principles to expediency. This was always the case with power-politics; but in democratic nations public opinion imposed some limits on the degree of cynicism and immorality. In totalitarian regimes like the Soviet Union the lack of limits was not only institutional, but “ethical”. Western statesmen still suffered from pangs of conscience; Soviet leaders “double-cross their capitalist partners with glee and a perfectly clean conscience”, for they “have learnt to scorn 'bourgeois ethics', and besides still have a dim feeling that they serve an Idea, though they have forgotten what exactly the Idea was about.” The combination of lack of political opposition and lack of inner scruple meant that Soviet leaders could sail “without ethical ballast” to a degree impossible for liberal democracies. The lack of doubt and scruple was, furthermore, taken as evidence of the Soviet Union's virtue by admirers in the West – even though a capacity for self-sacrifice had also marked the subjects of Tsarist Russia, Nazi Germany, and imperial Japan.<sup>445</sup>

Despite such attacks on ruthlessness, Koestler himself felt the conflicting pulls of the rival poles of moral purity and toughness – the ethics, in his terms, of the Yogi and the Commissar. If Koestler ultimately attained insight into the dangers of both poles, he had first to work his way through the path of the “Commissar” – and offer a report on what he had found. *Darkness at Noon* presents three very different “Commissar”-figures: Rubashov, more sensitive and principled than many fellow revolutionists, but with a career of ruthless action behind him; Ivanov, his former comrade turned interrogator, a cynic in whom something of the old revolutionary idealism still stirs; and the crude, fanatical Gletkin, a “new man”, a product of the

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<sup>445</sup> “The End of an Illusion”, *The Yogi and the Commissar*, 193-4; “Soviet Myth and Reality”, *ibid* 133-5.

Stalinist system.

Ivanov and Gletkin both pose their own challenges for, and effect – not always intentionally – different sorts of changes within, Rubashov. But it is Ivanov, self-consciously taking on the role of Mephistophelean interlocutor,<sup>446</sup> who articulates the warring moral impulses and dispositions which divide Rubashov against himself, and which structure the ethical drama of the novel. The first disposition is “Christian and humane, declares the individual to be sacrosanct, and asserts that the rules of arithmetic are not to be applied to human units.” The opposed ethic “starts from the basic principle that a collective aim justifies all means, and not only allows, but demands, that the individual should in every way be subordinated and sacrificed to the community – which may dispose of it as an experimentation rabbit or a sacrificial lamb. The first conception could be called anti-vivisection morality, the second, vivisection morality”.<sup>447</sup> According to Ivanov, these two alternatives exhaust the field: they are the *only* possible conceptions of human ethics. Rubashov has lived by vivisection-morality; now he is wavering, feeling the pull of scruples and doubts that had occasionally stirred before, but mainly lain silent. Ivanov seeks to win Rubashov back to his revolutionary faith, and so make him confess: to subjugate him, by convincing him that the Party is *right*, and that all that happens to Rubashov is both necessary and just.

Ivanov is a rationalist. His attack on anti-vivisection morality is based largely on the

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<sup>446</sup> Koestler perhaps intended Ivanov's name to evoke Ivan Karamazov, and his dialog with Rubashov to echo the speech of the Grand Inquisitor in Ivan's parable-within-a-novel. If this latter parallel holds, we might take Rubashov's inability to respond to Ivanov as an echo of Christ's silence at the end of Ivan's story. (Cf. Roger Berkowitz, “Approaching Infinity: Dignity in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*”, *Philosophy and Literature* 33 [2009], 301-2)

<sup>447</sup> *Darkness at Noon*, 160-61. Koestler – through Ivanov – thus frames the issue of political ruthlessness in terms of conceptions or theories of morality; and my discussion tracks this framing. Below, I suggest that Koestler's account also depicts the larger ethos of Communist ruthlessness that was tied to “vivisectionist” morality.

suggestion that it is muddled, foolish: “The principle that the end justifies the means is and remains the only rule of political ethics; anything else is just vague chatter and melts away between one's fingers ...” And if the end – as Rubashov agrees – is a revolution that will abolish exploitation and injustice, then the means must be drastic: “a revolution conducted according to the rules of cricket is an absurdity”. Ivanov's sneering at Rubashov's nascent scruples is partly a play on the prisoner's vanity: such foolishness is unworthy of a rational thinker like Rubashov. But his appeal is not just to Rubashov's vanity. He seeks to trap Rubashov through the latter's sincere commitment to reason. And this line of attack is effective: Rubashov must admit that “Logically, Ivanov was right in everything he said”.<sup>448</sup>

Ivanov also adopts the tone of the logician in presenting the two moralities as radically opposed. It is impossible to mix the “vivisectionist” and “anti-vivisectionist” moralities – and those who try to do so are humbugs and dilettantes: “Whoever is burdened with power and responsibility finds out on the first occasion that he has to choose” – and he will find himself driven inevitably to the second alternative. “In times of need – and politics are chronically in a time of need” rulers will always “evoke 'exceptional circumstances'”, which demand exceptional measures. (Whether or not the sovereign is the one who determines the exception, they who find themselves sovereign will be drawn to declaring exceptions.)

Like many proponents of the morality of power before him, Ivanov's position is not simply reactive, or dictated by immediate circumstances. He means to effect a moral revolution in which the flabby, sentimental, liberal-moralistic “God” is overthrown, and Satan is revealed as the true model of morality. Ivan Karamazov's shabby devil has grown into a dark revolutionist

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<sup>448</sup> Ibid., 159, 98, 160. Cf. Berkowitz, *op.cit.*, 296-7.



angel who is “thin, ascetic”, “a fanatical devotee of logic” who “reads Machiavelli,”<sup>449</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, Marx and Hegel; he is cold and unmerciful to mankind, out of a kind of mathematical mercifulness.”, condemned to “strip himself of every scruple in the name of a higher scrupulousness, and to challenge the hatred of mankind because of his love for it – an abstract and geometric love.”<sup>450</sup> As with Lukacs, a ruthless political Machiavellianism is revealed to be the price demanded by moral idealism; and willingness to pay this price is identified with virtuous selflessness. While the revolutionist-Satan's ruthlessness is really a “higher scrupulousness”, the greatest *criminals* in history “are not of the type Nero and Fouche, but of the type Gandhi and Tolstoy. Gandhi's inner voice has done more to prevent the liberation of India than the British guns. To sell oneself for thirty pieces of silver is an honest transaction; but to sell oneself to one's own conscience is to abandon mankind.” For, to seek to “conduct history according to the maxims of the Sunday school means to leave everything as it is.”<sup>451</sup> To serve the cause of human progress and liberation requires lies, manipulation, and rigid intolerance. To reject violence, deception, betrayal; to respect truth, to question arbitrary authority, to insist on freedom to disagree – all this is now regarded as selfishness and vanity.

Ivanov thus invokes a version of the ethic of “realism”, appealing to the importance of consequences and a sense of responsibility. But his argument has an added, distinctly Marxian-revolutionary component: its reliance on the multi-faceted category of History. A sense of the shape and meaning of history determines the individual's perception of events and evaluation of

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<sup>449</sup> Rubashov has earlier noted that it is reported that “No.1” – Stalin – “has Machiavelli's *Prince* lying permanently by his bedside. So he should: since then, nothing really important has been said about the rules of political ethics.” (*Darkness at Noon*, 98).

<sup>450</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., 156.

alternatives. The ethos – and view of ethics – expounded by Ivanov relies on a perception of history in general as a narrative of crisis and redemption, and of the present as a moment of decisive crisis. It was the nature of their time as one of crucial transformation that licensed drastic measures: for at such historical moments, “there is no other rule possible than the old one, that the end justifies the means” – “all means, without exception”.<sup>452</sup> The Revolution – and its incarnation, the Communist Party and the Soviet state – must not perish; not to perish takes on the weight of a moral duty to hold the bulwark of Revolution, at any cost to freedom or truth, at any price in blood.<sup>453</sup> And those who did not understand this necessity – the “short-sighted, the aesthetes, the moralists” – had to be destroyed.<sup>454</sup> This justification of ruthlessness and terror in relation to a particular moment allowed the perpetrators to justify their acts as both necessary, and *limited*: the ethic of ruthlessness, called for by the nature of the moment, could be abandoned with a sigh of relief once the moment had passed.

The future, then, looms as a time of relief – and of vindication, which will retroactively absolve the sins and salve the sufferings of the revolutionary present. The future also stands as the end in relation to which the means of struggle are to be justified – an end at once drastically urgent, radically transformative, and desperately difficult to achieve. As Ivanov reminds Rubashov, “We are tearing the old skin off mankind and giving it a new one. That is not an occupation for people with weak nerves.” This is a “surgical operation which had to be done once and for all”; to hold back from it is not only cowardly, but actually does more harm. While

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 98, 243.

<sup>453</sup> Elsewhere, Koestler explained the rationale for suppression of free discussion in Communist cells with reference to two slogans of the German Party: “The front-line is no place for discussions” “Wherever a Communist happens to be, he is always in the front-line.” (TGTF 50).

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., 241-2.

this analogy provokes Rubashov to reply that “I see the flayed body of this generation: but I see no trace of the new skin”, in the end he partially relapses into his earlier outlook, telling himself “One cannot heal a person mortally ill by pious exhortations. The only solution was the surgeon's knife and his cool calculation.”<sup>455</sup> Such doubts do not assail Rubashov's second, younger and more ruthless interrogator, Gletkin. Gletkin still believes in the glorious future of freedom and kindness. But to get there, the agents of the revolution must “get through. The quicker the better ... In a hundred years we will be able to appeal to the criminal's reason and social instincts. Today we have still to work on his physical constitution, and crush him, physically and mentally, if necessary”.<sup>456</sup>

In contrast to Gletkin, Rubashov and Ivanov recognize the tenuousness of the foundations on which they have built their political lives. According to their own principles, the outcome of historical struggle is the measure of rightness. But who will be proved right can only be known later. The peculiar horror emanated by “No 1” – that is, Stalin – “consisted in the possibility that he was in the right”, so that “all those he killed had to admit, even with the bullet in the back of their necks, that he conceivably might be right. There was no certainty; only the appeal to that mocking oracle they called History, who gave her sentence only when the jaws of the appealer had long since fallen to dust.” Rubashov realizes the danger and vanity of speaking and acting for History. The revolutionary who serves History must “act on credit and to sell his soul to the devil, in the hope of history's absolution”. For if they do not know that History will prove them right, they also do not know whether it will prove them – or their even more ruthless

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<sup>455</sup> Ibid. 163, 165, 263.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 104.

colleagues – wrong. The Party was concerned only with who is objectively in the right, as determined by history; questions of motive, of character were “complete nonsense”.<sup>457</sup> Once long-range historical consequentialism is embraced, the standards for moral judgment become murky; individual moral discrimination loses any sense of orientation, and moral resolve is undermined. When the bullet is almost in Rubashov, he wonders whether there really does exist a “Promised Land” for wandering mankind; wherever he looks, he sees only “desert and the darkness of night”, and as he dies he can no longer distinguish between “No. 1” and “he with the glassy gaze” – Hitler.<sup>458</sup>

The perspective of “History” places the distant future in the forefront; understanding the meaning of the present solely in relation to this future, it dwarfs the role of individual agency – and thus, concern with individual morality. It also dwarfs the significance of present individuals – and thus, their claim to moral concern. Koestler accordingly made criticism of this long-term perspective part of his later anti-Communist argument (as would many post-war liberals). Individual agency – the “subjective” factor in history – may not count in the long-run; but in the short-term (that is, the “historical” short-term, which can be a century) individual actions and accidents can make a considerable difference. And, what is more, “politics do not count in units of centuries but of years”: this means that in politics there is a “margin of freedom and subjective responsibility” for individual leaders. This responsibility is “not an abstract responsibility to history, but an ethical responsibility to their contemporaries.” To evaluate events and potentialities *politically* is to count them “in short time-units” – and thus, in terms of

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<sup>457</sup> Ibid., 13, 98-9, 101.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 271

immediate human suffering.<sup>459</sup>

From the perspective of Communism, the individual is subordinated, indeed wholly subjected, not only to History, but to History's agent, the Party. As Koestler later recalled, “Both morally and logically the Party was infallible: morally, because its aims were right, that is, in accord with the Dialectic of History, and these aims justified all means; logically, because the Party was the vanguard of the Proletariat, and the Proletariat was the embodiment of the active principle in History”<sup>460</sup> And the Party could, for its own good – and thus, in the name of history – do whatever it needed to with its members. In this, it followed the model of the Church: as Koestler quotes Dietrich von Nieheim, Bishop of Verden, saying, “When the existence of the Church is threatened, she is released from the commandments of morality. With unity as the end, the use of every means is sanctified, even cunning, treachery, violence, simony, prison, death. For all order is for the sake of the community, and the individual must be sacrificed to the common good”.<sup>461</sup>

Adopting the perspective of History meant not only discounting individual agency and the immediate effects of action; it also meant adopting an outlook and temper that was coldly indifferent to individual fate and moral doubt. For “History knows no scruples and no hesitation. Inert and unerring, she flows towards her goal. At every bend in her course she leaves the mud which she carries and the corpses of the drowned. History knows her way. She makes

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<sup>459</sup> “Soviet Myth and Reality”, *The Yogi and the Commissar*, 184-5. Koestler points out that both Nazism and Stalinism might be excused as mere “detours”, which would not significantly affect the progressive course of the centuries: with time, the “rough edges” of either victorious Nazism or victorious Stalinism would be smoothed away, so that Europe in A.D. 2500 would look much the same, if Hitler's conquest had been successful, as it will in the wake of Hitler's defeat.

<sup>460</sup> TGTF, 65.

<sup>461</sup> *Darkness at Noon*, 97.

no mistakes”. Those who cannot “follow her crooked course was washed on to the bank, for such was her law. The motives of the individual did not matter to her. His conscience did not matter to her”.<sup>462</sup> History is ruthless, an “inhumane, unscrupulous builder, mixing its mortar of lies, blood and mud”, free from self-doubt (“What does history know of nail-biting?”). Those who identify with and serve it must be, too.<sup>463</sup>

We are dealing here, not only with a set of moral arguments, but the attempt to establish a new sort of moral character and identity – a moral revolution which would replace “the nineteenth century's liberal ethics of 'fair play'” with a politics of “neo-Machiavellism”, a “revolutionary ethics” that allowed for no scruples.<sup>464</sup> The first commandment of the revolutionary morality was to serve the revolution – to subordinate all other concerns, feelings, and interests to it. This required an ethos of hardness, coldness, impersonality. This required, above all, a repudiation of virtues, or impulses, of compassion and pity: thus, Gletkin – in whom pity has effectively been extirpated – explains that “Your task, Citizen Rubashov, is to avoid awakening sympathy and pity. Sympathy and pity for the opposition are a danger to the country”.<sup>465</sup>

Not only pity, but any sort of purely individualized moral sentiment – conscience – is a danger. A conscience, warns Ivanov, makes one unfit for revolution: “Conscience eats through the brain like a cancer, until the whole of the grey matter is devoured ... Sympathy, conscience, disgust, despair, repentance, and atonement are for us repellent debauchery. To sit down and let

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<sup>462</sup> Ibid., 43-4, 76.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid., 13, 129.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., 243.

oneself be hypnotized by one's own navel, to turn up one's eyes and humbly offer the back of one's neck to Gletkin's revolver – that is the easy solution. The greatest temptation for the like of us” – the idealists– is “to renounce violence, to repent, to make peace with oneself”. But so long as chaos dominates the world, “every compromise with one's conscience is perfidy”.<sup>466</sup> Gletkin demands that an ideal of individual integrity, understood as fidelity to the individual's moral principles and intuitions, should be sacrificed to a different, superior form of integrity: dedication to the success of the larger cause. The idea of truth, too, must be sacrificed to revolutionary expediency. For the revolutionary morality represented by Gletkin, “Truth is what is useful to humanity, falsehood what is harmful”.<sup>467</sup> This subordination of truth to expediency leaves individuals with little to grasp hold of or stand on. Rubashov finds himself getting lost in the “labyrinth of calculated lies and dialectic pretenses ... The ultimate truth always receded a step; visible remained only the penultimate lie with which one had to serve it.”<sup>468</sup>

The sacrifice of pity, conscience, and truth was necessary to maintain the strength and efficacy of the revolution in the face of desperate challenges. As Rubashov explains, while still in his revolutionary-conspirator's role, the Party faces “severe trial”; what will decide success or ensure failure is whether they can maintain an “unbroken will”. And so, “Whoever now goes soft and weak” - by, for instance, expressing doubts or reporting inconvenient facts – “does not belong in our ranks”, and must be cast out – even if this also means (as in Rubashov's case) turning over a sincerely loyal, if dissenting, Party activist to the Gestapo.<sup>469</sup> For the Party's

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 152-3, 155-6.

<sup>467</sup> *Darkness at Noon*, 232.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid., 197-8.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., 42.

potency depended on it maintaining a bedrock of unquestioning faith.

Its capacity to impart such faith and confidence was a major part of Communism's appeal. For Koestler (as for Lukacs), conversion to the Party brought an “inner peace and serenity” and a “blissfully clean conscience”; the “faith” inspired by ideological doctrine “alone makes life worth living”.<sup>470</sup> This aspect of the revolutionary ethos was typified by No. 1 himself, whose strength derives from his “tough, slow, sullen and unshakeable” faith in himself. Rubashov, in contrast, has lost faith in his infallibility; and “That is why I am lost”. “No. 1” was “the embodiment of a certain human characteristic”: an “absolute belief in the infallibility of one's own conviction, from which he drew the strength for his complete unscrupulousness”.<sup>471</sup> This ethos was fully embraced by Stalin's opponent and victim Trotsky, who declared that “Nothing great has been accomplished in history without fanaticism.”<sup>472</sup>

The emphasis on doctrinal conformity and dogmatic confidence was related to the ideologist's belief in the importance of ideas – and more particularly, the danger of error: for while “virtue does not matter to history, and ... crimes remain unpunished”, every error has “its consequences and revenges itself unto the seventh generation.” Therefore, the founders of the new order “concentrated all our efforts on preventing error and destroying the very seeds of it ... Each wrong idea we follow is a crime committed against future generations. Therefore we have to punish wrong ideas as others punish crimes.” This meant that the agents of the revolution had to punish not only deeds, but thoughts: “We admitted no private sphere, not even inside a man's

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<sup>470</sup> TGTF 23, 33.

<sup>471</sup> *Darkness at Noon*, 101, 208.

<sup>472</sup> Trotsky, quoted in the epigraph to Joshua Rubenstein, *Leon Trotsky: A Revolutionary's Life* (Yale University Press, 2011).



skull”.<sup>473</sup>

The revolutionary ethos involved the rejection of some traditional moral ideals and resources – and the drastic redefinition of others, such as honor. “As the only moral criterion which we recognize is that of social utility,” Rubashov writes to himself, “the public disavowal of one's conviction in order to remain in the Party's ranks is obviously more honourable than the quixotism of carrying on a hopeless struggle ... Questions of personal pride ... personal feelings of tiredness, disgust and shame – are to be cut off root and branch ...”<sup>474</sup> In a confrontation with his neighbor in the next cell – a tsarist officer, with whom he communicates through taps on the adjoining prison wall – Rubashov further expounds the ethic of revolutionary honor:

No. 402 tapped quickly and precisely  
HONOUR IS TO LIVE AND DIE FOR ONE'S BELIEF  
Rubashov answered just as quickly:  
HONOUR IS TO BE USEFUL WITHOUT VANITY  
No. 402 answered this time louder and more sharply:  
HONOUR IS DECENCY – NOT USEFULNESS.  
WHAT IS DECENCY? asked Rubashov, comfortably spacing the letters ...  
SOMETHING YOUR KIND WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND, answered No. 402 to  
Rubashov's question. Rubashov shrugged his shoulders:  
WE HAVE REPLACED DECENCY BY REASON<sup>475</sup>

And later, Rubashov reflects: “Honour was to serve without vanity, without sparing oneself, and until the last consequence”.<sup>476</sup>

As this suggests, the revolutionary ethos was a self-abnegating or self-sacrificing one, which demanded, and praised, the complete subordination of the self to the demands of history.

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<sup>473</sup> *Darkness at Noon*, 100.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, 177-8.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

Even self-preservation became a matter of instrumental usefulness relative to the demands of history. One should preserve oneself not for the sake of one's life, but to "keep oneself in reserve for later on ... For those who had changed the face of history, there was no other duty than to stay here and be ready".<sup>477</sup> The revolutionary ethos demanded, above all, *discipline* – both self-discipline, and submission to discipline by the Party. The ethos of hardness, which demanded and glorified, strength, ultimately left its adherents morally weak, without resources of their own to resist the demands of necessity, or of political expediency.

*Darkness at Noon* is a hard book to read; it is hard not only because it charts Rubashov's physical and mental trials and his ultimate execution, but because it charts the difficult awakening, and subsequent defeat and dissolution, of a moral personality. Rubashov finds himself in a trap, in which the stirring of his conscience comes to seem irresponsible and vain, while his connivance in his own destruction comes to seem both necessary and noble. In Rubashov, Koestler shows the ultimate dangers of the revolutionary morality, not only to those deceived, tortured and killed on its command, but to those who give their lives over to it. The drama of *Darkness at Noon* is that of a moral struggle within Rubashov: he is pulled by both the claims of personal conscience and those of political necessity. He recognizes the incompatibility of these impulses – and his own inability to wholly free himself from either. It is this that leads Rubashov to his first guilty plea:

I plead guilty to having followed sentimental impulses, and in so doing to have been led into contradiction with historical necessity. I have lent my ear to the laments of the sacrificed, and thus became deaf to the arguments which proved the necessity to sacrifice them. I plead guilty to having rated the question of guilt and innocence higher than that of utility and harmfulness. Finally, I plead guilty to having placed the idea of man above

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<sup>477</sup> Ibid., 129.

the idea of mankind.<sup>478</sup>

Rubashov is vulnerable because he has lived his life by the revolutionary morality, and to repudiate it now is to deprive his life of its meaning – and his past crimes of their justification. His conscience, Koestler suggests, has been destroyed by commitment to reason. What distinguished the Bolsheviks from other radicals was their cultivation of an unsparing “logical consistency”, which follows “every thought down to its final consequence”, and acts accordingly, without hesitation.<sup>479</sup> In such a view, death itself came to be seen as merely “the logical solution to political divergences”, a “factor with which one reckoned and which bore rather an abstract character ... The act of dying ... was a technical detail, with no claim to interest”.<sup>480</sup> This extremism of reason justifies enslavement – and enslaves its adherents. As Rubashov reflects, having “thrown overboard all conventions and rules of cricket-morality”, the revolutionaries were “under the terrible compulsion to follow our thought down to its final consequence and to act in accordance to it”.<sup>481</sup> It is Rubashov's own compulsion to think things out to their logical conclusion that ultimately betrays him, leading him to capitulation because he has – with the promptings of his interrogators – reasoned himself into capitulation. “For forty years he had lived strictly in accordance with the vows of his order, the Party. He had held to the rules of logical calculation. He had burnt the remains of the old, illogical morality from his consciousness with the acid of reason.” But this had led only to the absurdity of the show trial – the “running-amuck of pure reason”. Perhaps, Rubashov wonders, “it was not suitable for a man

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid., 193-4.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid., 76, 138.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 98.

to think every thought to its logical conclusion”; perhaps “it did not suit man to be completely freed from old bonds, from the steadying brakes of 'Thou shalt not' and 'Thou mayst not', and to be allowed to tear along straight towards the goal.” It did not suit man to sail without “ethical ballast”: pure reason was a “defective compass, which led one on such a winding, twisted course that the goal finally disappeared in the mist.”<sup>482</sup> The old porter Wassilij – a friend of Rubashov in the latter's revolutionary hey-day, now persecuted by his uncomprehendingly literalistic daughter – cries out “It's come to this in the world now that cleverness and decency are at loggerheads, and whoever sides with one must do without the other. It's not good for a man to work things out too much.”<sup>483</sup>

Koestler's account suggests that once one has embraced the ethical reasoning of “vivisection morality”, one will tend to cultivate, and have one's moral identity and vision shaped by, an ethos of revolutionary hardness. And this will leave few and fragile resources for resisting the slide toward inhumanity.

One of these resources – possibly – is a sense of individual integrity. But, as suggested above, considering of *Darkness at Noon* leaves the reader with an ambiguous sense of the meaning of integrity. These complexities may be brought into focus by reading the novel alongside Bernard Williams's account of integrity – elements of which are confirmed, and undercut, by what we find in Koestler's work. Rubashov's case reveals the importance of what Williams identifies as integrity – the individual's attachment to her “identity-conferring commitments”, abandonment of which causes a loss of sense of the meaning of one's moral life,

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<sup>482</sup> Ibid. 102, 263-5.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 254.

the coherence of oneself as a moral agent. Rubashov, questioning the meaning of his life as a Communist, is faced with the problem Williams describes: unless “propelled forward” by commitment, “it is unclear why I should go on at all.”<sup>484</sup> As Williams stresses, integrity thus understood is not a virtue: it may motivate or enable action, as a virtue does, but the action is motivated or enabled may be deplorable (Gletkin seems to be a perfectly integrated through fidelity to his identity-conferring commitments).<sup>485</sup> This account helps to make sense of Rubashov's predicament insofar as it allows us to describe what has befallen Rubashov; but it does not allow us to identify what, on Koestler's view, it is that Rubashov lacks – that capacity which will not only bring some unity and meaning to his life, but that will allow him to recognize himself as a moral *agent*, with certain *responsibilities* to others – and indeed to himself.

On the other hand, one might see Rubashov's ordeal as confirming a more positive implication of Williams's argument: the importance of moral theory, and ethical practice, attending to personal character, or to relationship of self to its actions – as opposed to the consequences of action, and the rightness of cause. There is, in the version of ruthless consequentialism by which Rubashov is gripped, something of Williams's description of the utilitarian conception of moral deliberation and agency, which alienates the individual “from his actions and the source of his actions in his own convictions”, making him “a channel between the input of everyone's projects, including his own, and an output of optimistic decision ... this is to neglect the extent to which *his* actions and *his* decisions have to be seen as the actions and

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<sup>484</sup> Bernard Williams, “Persons, Character and Morality”, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973-1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 12.

<sup>485</sup> Idem., “Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence”, *ibid* 49.

decisions which flow from the projects and attitudes with which he is most closely identified. It is thus, in the most literal sense, an attack on his integrity.”<sup>486</sup> Rubashov's tragedy is in part that his sense of integrity is founded in adherence to a philosophy and a movement that denies the importance of the sort of moral identity and agency of which integrity is part. Thus, even once his conscience has been awakened, he is unable to integrate his newfound moral insights with the larger story and meaning of his life.

Rubashov's moral awakening is, as noted, ultimately incomplete; but it does provide some intimations of the moral resources that may prevent a slide into inhumanity. So does Koestler's own experience of moral awakening, as he subsequently portrayed it. Koestler's sojourn in Franco's prisons induced in him a faith-shattering experience of conversion, born of fear, pity, and something else – a mystical sense of “inner peace” which transformed his outlook. He now came to intuit what he could only imperfectly express – and then, in forms that he had once rejected as bourgeois commonplaces: “that man is a reality, mankind an abstraction; that men cannot be treated as units in operations of political arithmetic because they behave like the symbols for zero and the infinite, which dislocate all mathematical operations;<sup>487</sup> that the end justifies the means only within very narrow limits; that ethics is not a function of social utility, and charity not a petty-bourgeois sentiment but the gravitational force which keeps civilization in its orbit.”<sup>488</sup>

Similarly, in prison, forced into introspection, Rubashov starts to feel the stirrings of an

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<sup>486</sup> Williams, “Integrity”, J. J. C. Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), 117.

<sup>487</sup> *Darkness at Noon* was published in France as *Le Zéro et l'Infini*.

<sup>488</sup> TGTF 68.

inner, completely individual voice. He isn't sure what to make of it: “with the shyness of emphasizing the first person singular customary in the Party, he had christened it the 'grammatical fiction'.” He feels his usual compulsion to pursue this strange entity to its “logical conclusion”; but to his consternation finds that it seems “to begin just where the 'thinking to a conclusion' ended.”<sup>489</sup> The irreducibility, the primacy and mystery of the individual “I” stands against the ethics of the Party, which defines the individual as “a multitude of one million divided by one million.”<sup>490</sup>

This discovery of his own individuality is not quite enough to awaken conscience: recognizing the individuality of both himself *and others* is necessary for that. Watching the broken, terrified sailor Bogrov – with whom Rubashov had shared exile in 1905, who he had taught to read and write – dragged to execution does. “The whimpering of Bogrov unbalanced the logical equation ... The unimportant factor had grown to the immeasurable, the absolute; Bogrov's whining, the inhuman sound of the voice which had called out his name, the hollow beat of the drumming, filled his ears; they smothered the thin voice of reason, covered it as the surf covers the gurgling of the drowning.”<sup>491</sup>

The transformation effected here is a testament to the power of *individualizing* perception – to the force, and the importance, of particulars, which the Communist ethos had sought to denigrate and efface. The perception of the concreteness of individuals is connected to the faculty of imagination, which has grown atrophied in Rubashov – but now, painfully, reawakens.

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<sup>489</sup> *Darkness at Noon*, 112.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-6.

But this nascent conscience leaves Rubashov morally confused, asking himself whether he must pay, not only for crimes, but “for deeds which were right and necessary? ... Must one also pay for righteous acts? Was there another measure besides that of reason?” And indeed, did the righteous man “perhaps carry the heaviest debt when weighed by this other measure?”<sup>492</sup>

Here Koestler's moral drama may hold uncomfortable implications for how we think about political ethics.<sup>493</sup> The book's treatment of the price of conscience is unflinching. Rubashov's own sense of guilt helps to destroy him – and makes him useful to his destroyers. He comes to confess – thus, to play into the regime's hands – because he is convinced that he is indeed guilty and deserves punishment, even if it is not for the crimes that he has committed. Rubashov's recognition of his guilt, and feeling that he must “pay” for it, may appear an affirmation of the morality he has rejected; but the silence it leads him to impose on himself leaves the voices of his accusers unanswered. And Rubashov's remaining sense of honor and moral dignity seems to merely make his life harder. Thus, under interrogation, a “peculiar, twisted sense of duty” forces him to resist with what remain of his powers of reason, giving way inch-by-inch through the process of sleep-deprivation and brow-beating to which Gletkin subjects him. Though he knows he is lost, and that his resistance is meaningless, Rubashov feels he must “continue the lost battle to the end – even though it were only a battle with windmills”.<sup>494</sup> Other elements of his moral personality that save him from fully conforming to the ethos of hardness – his compulsion to think his position through to its logical conclusion, and

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<sup>492</sup> Ibid., 56-7.

<sup>493</sup> This reflects the strength and usefulness of the book. If Koestler was on his way to becoming an anti-Communist fanatic, his closeness to his material and his novelist's instincts prevented him from making *Darkness at Noon* a simple, and thus reassuring, affirmation of dignity and decency.

<sup>494</sup> *Darkness at Noon*, 226.



his instinct to see matters through the eyes of others, including his persecutors – make him vulnerable, not only by leading others to regard him as “soft and sentimental” and thus “no good for the task and had to be pushed aside”, but also by weakening his ability to resist: that “familiar and fatal constraint” (or “compulsion”) to “put himself in the position of his opponent” ultimately plays into Gletkin's hands.<sup>495</sup> Indeed, part of the infernal power of the Stalinist machine is that it makes use of remnants of a “liberal” morality of personal responsibility and open-mindedness – just as it makes use of the form of judicial investigation, trial, the rule of law. Liberal moralism, like liberal legalism, are both perverted and subverted, turned against themselves.

Rubashov isn't the only character whose residual virtues prove to be weaknesses. Ivanov, projecting the visage of a revolutionary cynic, still needs the solace of the bottle to keep himself going; this makes him too emotional, and thus vulnerable to the machinations of his subordinate, Gletkin. Only Gletkin, his conscience wholly clear because he is too single-mindedly dogmatic to admit doubt, has the strength to triumph, and to remain seemingly undamaged, in this world. Conscience does not exactly make cowards of the revolutionaries: but it does seem to make them either uneasy killers, or hapless victims. The morally sensitive, conscience-ridden individual seems to be in a situation analogous to the predicament of the liberal faced by anti-liberal opponents: hampered, and even tormented, by constraints from which her ruthless opponent is free. Ethical scruples seem a tactical disadvantage.

Yet the abandonment of ethical scruples also leads to destruction – the destruction of those goals that have inspired political action to begin with. (None of Koestler's characters is a

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<sup>495</sup> Ibid., 23, 37, 111.

mere cynic.) Is there a way out of this problem? Koestler himself perceived, and in the close of *Darkness at Noon* invoked, one alternative path, or at least the intimation of one. This lay in an embrace of the ineffable “oceanic feeling”, the discovery by the self of its connection to an underlying spiritual unity of the universe, which Koestler had himself felt while imprisoned in Spain, and which he allows Rubashov to glimpse in his last moment. It may be that Koestler's message is that reason and argument are useless, and politics irredeemable from the point of view of a decent morality. All that remains is the path of the Weberian “mystic”, or as Koestler himself put it, the “Yogi”: withdrawal from the world, the pursuit of cosmic peace through inner transformation.

But Koestler's prison conversion was not to quietism or mysticism, but to a the reaffirmation of a humanistic political morality. It is this direction that I would like to pursue, using the admittedly limited – but still powerfully suggestive – resources offered by Koestler's account. One path suggested by this account is to question the way in which members of the Party had thought about the relationship between the purposes they had been pursuing (or thought they had been pursuing), and their own actions and characters as these evolved in the pursuit of those goals. The revolutionaries had “dreamed of power with the object of abolishing power; of ruling over the people to wean them from the habit of being ruled.”<sup>496</sup> These goals set the revolutionaries apart from other would-be rulers, who longed for dominion as such; they were noble and splendid. But they made for a tragedy sadder, and horrors worse, than the usual savageries of power-politics. When his disillusion is most resolute, Rubashov puts this challenge to Ivanov:

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<sup>496</sup> Ibid 60.

“in the interest of a just distribution of land we deliberately let die of starvation about five million farmers and their families in one year. So consequent were we in the liberation of human beings from the shackles of industrial exploitation that we sent about ten million people to do forced labor ... under conditions similar to those of antique galley slaves. So consequent that, to settle a difference of opinion, we know only one argument: death ... We whip the groaning masses of the country towards a theoretical future happiness, which only we can see.”

Laying waste to a generation, leaving nothing left but a “moaning, numbed, apathetic lump of sacrificial flesh” – these were “the consequences of our consequentialness.”<sup>497</sup>

But what follows from this, asks Ivanov: “Should we sit with idle hands because the consequences of an act are never quite to be foreseen”? Rubashov struggles to answer this question. Was the “operation” through which senseless, humanly-created suffering was eliminated at the cost of a “temporary enormous increase” in suffering justified? “Obviously it was, if one spoke in the abstract of 'mankind'; but, applied to 'man' in the singular ... the real human being of bone and flesh and blood and skin, the principle led to absurdity”: “the equation did not work out” But the error lay not in the equation, but “in the whole mathematical system of thought” – in the precept which Rubashov had held to be incontestable, and in the name of which he had sacrificed others and ultimately found himself sacrificed: that “the end justifies the means. It was this sentence which had killed the great fraternity of the Revolution and made them all run amuck.”<sup>498</sup> The revolutionaries had correctly diagnosed the century's disease, but “wherever we applied the healing knife a new sore appeared. Our will was hard and pure, we should have been loved by the people. But they hate us. Why are we so odious and detested?” The conclusion that Rubashov (almost) draws from this is that one must not allow the end to

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<sup>497</sup> Ibid., 161-3.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid. 164, 260, 263-5.

justify any means: some means inevitably poisoned the ends that they produced: “It was obviously not enough to direct man's eyes towards a goal and put a knife in his hand; it was unsuitable for him to experiment with a knife ... one cannot build Paradise with concrete.”<sup>499</sup>

Orwell suggested that this conclusion was ultimately anti-political. Politics could not be made with a pure head and heart; the morality of means could not be ignored, but nor could perfect morality in means be maintained.<sup>500</sup> And indeed, Koestler eventually found himself unable to reconcile his moral and political perceptions, and withdrew from politics. This raises the uncomfortable question: Is Ivanov correct that the only viable alternatives, both in theory and in practice, are an unworldly purism, or a resort to “vivisection”? Must one choose between the purist withdrawal of the Yogi or the bloody advance of the Commissar?

Koestler's novel, and his example, provide no clear answer. But they do, indirectly, suggest one line of response – albeit one for which Koestler was temperamentally unsuited. This is simply not to pose the problem, or formulate the demands upon the moral agent, in such drastic terms. Both the Commissar and the Yogi aim at radical transformation; both (Koestler articulates this, but does not seem to be fully conscious of its significance) begin from and aim at an assumption of unity – the unity of the cause of all human ills (so that, if this one cause is destroyed, all ills will be cured), or the unity of the individual with the universe. It is this absolutism, this all-or-nothing (as well as “everything-is-connected”) standpoint, that makes both prone to falling down “slopes”, to yielding positions that, whether in ruthlessly efficient action or ruthlessly pure inaction, foster inhumanity. Koestler was aware of the dangers of the

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<sup>499</sup> Ibid., 59, 264.

<sup>500</sup> See Orwell, “Arthur Koestler” (1944), online at [http://orwell.ru/library/reviews/koestler/english/e\\_ak](http://orwell.ru/library/reviews/koestler/english/e_ak)

totalizing approach, but found it hard to escape it: “It is a difficult job to hang on in the middle of the slope, and a rather lonely one”<sup>501</sup> It was this lonely job that many of Koestler's fellow anti-totalitarian intellectuals, at their best, undertook.

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<sup>501</sup> Arthur Koestler, “Anatomy of a Myth”, *The Yogi and the Commissar*, 129.

## **Part II. A Political Ethics Between Ruthlessness and Purity: The Ethos of Tempered Liberalism**

I have sought, in the previous chapters, to show the centrality of both arguments about the ethics of political action, and ideals of the character, temper, and spirit of political actors, to attacks on liberalism by anti-liberals, to the positive program and ideals of anti-liberals, and to certain counter-critiques of anti-liberalism. My primary focus thus far has been either on anti-liberals, or on those such as Toller who rejected the ruthlessness that marked much anti-liberal politics without embracing liberalism) – and on Weber, who occupied an ambiguous position between the defense and critique of liberalism. In the chapters to come I will turn to look at several examples of liberal responses to the ethical phenomenon, and challenges, of anti-liberalism. This involves two chronological shifts – first, a slight move forward to the period of World War II and the Cold War – and, subsequently, to the milieu of the Eastern and Central-European dissidents of the 1970s and 1980s, continuing into the post-Communist period of the 1990s. The authors studied are responding, in some cases directly to the authors discussed in earlier chapters, and in all cases to the issues that these authors raised; but in different contexts.

They also are, of course, writing from a different position, of more-or-less firm commitment to liberalism. And insofar as this study is itself motivated by an interest in exploring how liberals might respond to the ethical challenges posed by anti-liberalism, and with reconstructing a variant of liberalism that does so as a position that might be learned from and inhabited today, there is also a shift in these chapters to a somewhat more directly prescriptive perspective, as I not only reconstruct and explore, but seek to revise and appropriate, the ideas I discuss.

## **Chapter 4. Between Cynicism and Sentimentality: Reinhold Niebuhr and The Chastening of Liberalism**

*Inevitably a compromise must be made, or is made, between the rigor of the ideal and the necessities of the day*<sup>502</sup>

*'Believe in virtue' he said. 'Believe in virtue. But just be skeptical about its attainment.'*<sup>503</sup>

*It isn't as simple as that*<sup>504</sup>

The anti-liberal critique of liberal innocence and moral squeamishness, and the embrace of radical aims and ruthless means that it fostered, presented a challenge from which many liberals recoiled – and which some calmly took up. Others responded more complexly, feeling the force of the anti-liberal argument – and, in some cases, embracing a version of it themselves. Often, as with Koestler, the experience of the anti-liberal temptation sharpened both sensitivity to anti-liberalism's pathologies, and the awareness of liberalism's vulnerabilities. Among those whose commitment to liberalism was tempered by the flames of radicalism and the icy blast of realism was Reinhold Niebuhr – the American theologian, ethicist, and publicist who set the agenda, and voiced the concerns, of reform-minded, liberal intellectuals during the Great Depression, World War II, and Cold War eras.<sup>505</sup> Niebuhr's intertwined accounts of history,

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<sup>502</sup> *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Meridian, 1957 [1929]), 13.

<sup>503</sup> Edmund Fuller, *Brothers Divided* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951), 134-5. These words are spoken, in Fuller's novel, by Raymond Unwin – a faithful fictionalization of Niebuhr.

<sup>504</sup> This was the way in which Niebuhr frequently began his responses to what others had said in conversation, as reported by a former student; in Charles Brown, *Niebuhr and his Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role and Legacy* (Trinity Press, 2002), 66.

<sup>505</sup> Richard Polenberg, "Foreword", Eyal Naveh, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Anti-Utopian Liberalism: Beyond Illusion and Despair* (Sussex Academic Press, 2002), vi; cf. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 151; Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* (Harper and Row, 1985); Kevin Mattson, *When America Was Great: The Fighting Faith of Postwar Liberalism* (Routledge, 2004); Eric Alterman and Kevin Mattson, *The Cause: The Fight for American Liberalism from Franklin Roosevelt to Barak Obama* (Viking, 2012).

moral psychology, and political ethics would do much to shape the outlook of post-war liberalism; his combination of a “realist” critique of liberal optimism, and a chastened ethos of liberal moderation make him a central, significant, and puzzling figure in the account of liberalism presented here. And his emphasis on qualities of humility, responsibility, irony, and hope, and practices of contrition, prophetic critique of power, discriminate judgment, open-ended dialog, and modest striving offered a model for how liberals might avoid both a complacent acceptance of (or despairing acquiescence to) injustice, without falling prey to bitterness or utopianism. At the same time, Niebuhr's work poses the question of how effectively liberals can avoid the twin dangers of cynicism and sentimentality without recourse to the Christian faith – with its postulation of absolute human values, insistence on absolute human limits, and promise of ultimate hope – on the foundation of which Niebuhr built his own political and ethical vision. Situating it within the context of the “liberal predicament”, and the attempt to advance a “tempered liberalism” to meet the ethical challenges of anti-liberalism, also throws light on the nature of Niebuhr's thought: it underscores the centrality to his outlook of questions of character and political practice, and reveals his post-war, liberal thought as representing a different, and less sharp, sort of break with his youthful radicalism than is often supposed.

In examining Niebuhr's criticisms of liberalism, it is well to remember his own observation that he tended “to be most critical of that in other men to which he is most tempted himself.”<sup>506</sup> Niebuhr's thought as an ethicist of political life can best be understood as an effort to learn from the wisdom, and to understand and expose the errors and dangers, of four ethical-psychological tendencies by which he was, at different moments, attracted and repelled: 1) an

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<sup>506</sup> *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 13.



attitude of complacency and compromise, born of a combination of selfishness and facile optimism (which he identified with pre-war liberalism); 2) a “purist” relation to morality and politics (which he found exemplified in some strains of pacifism); 3) a self-righteous fanaticism (which reached its nadir in Russian Communism); and 4) a cynical or despairing “realism” which abandoned moral commitments in favor of the service of power (which he attacked in post-war American thought). In seeking to steer between these shoals, Niebuhr offered arguments about the practices and institutional arrangements appropriate to a “realistic”, democratic politics; and expounded and exemplified a political ethos well suited to a sober, self-critical liberalism.

#### **A. Niebuhr's Critique of Liberalism: Against Sentimentalism and Complacency**

Niebuhr's youthful reaction against the practices and conduct, as well as the political and theological principles, which he associated with liberalism reflected his experiences as a congregational minister of the German Evangelical Synod in Detroit from 1915 to 1928. During this time Niebuhr “underwent a fairly complete conversion of thought which involved rejection of almost all the liberal theological ideals and ideas with which I ventured forth in 1915”.<sup>507</sup> Two phenomena contributed to this transformation. The first was the searing tableau of battlefield suffering and post-war vindictiveness presented by World War I, which induced a cynical perception of liberals' internationalist idealism as an ideological screen for imperialism and vengeance.<sup>508</sup> Niebuhr turned against the “incurable optimists who feel called upon to find a

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<sup>507</sup> Niebuhr, “Ten Years that Shook My World”, *Christian Century* April 26 1939. For a detailed exposition of Niebuhr's “liberal phase”, see Ernest F. Dibble, *Young Prophet Niebuhr: Reinhold Niebuhr's Early Search for Social Justice* (University Press of America, 1977).

<sup>508</sup> “What the War Did to My Mind”, *Christian Century*, September 27, 1928.; Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 26-9; Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 21-2, 25-6.

saving virtue in every evil and in every loss a compensation”, and thus hoped that the war would purify and ennoble those nations who waged it. To the contrary, he asserted that “if we have any sense of proportion”, it was impossible to ignore “what the individual is paying for a possible ultimate gain” to the larger world community: “We cannot help but think of the thousands of graves on the countrysides of Europe that are mute testimonies to the tragedy of individual life as revealed in this war, when we are asked to accept these optimistic assurances. The heroes and victims will not arise from their graves, though Europe may rise from its destruction.” This attack on optimism set the tone for Niebuhr's later work. It also points to the moral impulse behind Niebuhr's political thought and action: an assertion of the immeasurable value of each individual, against and above the demands of amoral societies.<sup>509</sup>

The other experience that contributed to Niebuhr's radicalization was witnessing the human costs of industrial labor in Detroit. Of a visit to an automobile factory, Niebuhr reported

Here manual labour is a drudgery and toil is slavery. The men cannot possibly find any satisfaction in their work ... Their sweat and their dull pain are part of the price paid for the fine cars we all run. And most of us run the cars without knowing what price is being paid for them. . . . We are all responsible. We all want the things which the factory produces and none of us is sensitive enough to care how much in human values the efficiency of the modern factory costs.<sup>510</sup>

This vision of misery amidst the heat and noise of factory work came courtesy of Henry Ford's auto plants – supposedly a model of enlightened industrial practice. If Ford's factories presented a panorama of proletarian misery that made Niebuhr a radical; Ford's complacent customers made Niebuhr (self-)critical of liberal complicity and evasion. Ford himself provided a picture of

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<sup>509</sup> “The Nation's Crime Against the Individual”, *The Atlantic Monthly* 118 (November 1916), 609-14.

<sup>510</sup> Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 79-80.

the workings of pride, and the dangers of unaccountable power, that shaped Niebuhr's understanding of moral psychology and politics. Ford was a man whose idealism was so pure and naïve that it was akin to cynicism; his moral pretensions veiled and made a mockery of the misery he inflicted on, and the absolute power he exercised over, his employees. His combination of “sentimentality and shrewdness” constituted a warning, as well as a target: it was an extreme form of the vices of liberal Protestantism – vices to which the young Niebuhr was given.<sup>511</sup>

These early experiences turned Niebuhr against liberalism as he understood it – as a doctrine defined by commitment to *laissez-faire* economic policies, and faith in progress through the workings of human rationality and benevolence.<sup>512</sup> Liberalism – both economic and political liberalism, and the liberalism of the “Social Gospel”, to which Niebuhr had himself subscribed – depended on a sanguine “sense of optimism and of hope” and a belief that human nature was plastic and human conflicts manageable, so that political conflicts could be “dissolved in the end by reason or by love” – an assumption that was blind to the “tragic”, perennial gap between human aspirations and achievements, and the conflictual and “tortuous” character of human history.<sup>513</sup>

Even before his turn against liberal doctrine, Niebuhr had reacted against the *ethos* of liberalism. The young Niebuhr labeled liberalism a “philosophy of the middle class, lacking the

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<sup>511</sup> Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Pantheon, 1985), 95, 99, 109.

<sup>512</sup> See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in American Political Thought and Life”, in Charles W. Kegley, ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought* (Pilgrim Press, 1984), 201; John C. Bennett, “Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics”, *ibid.*, 127.

<sup>513</sup> Schlesinger, *op. cit.*, 191, 194; cf. Niebuhr, *Pious and Secular America* [PSA] (Scribners, 1958), 4, 9; “The Blindness of Liberalism”, *Radical Religion* I (August 1936), 4-5; *Love and Justice*, 264.

fervency of youth and its willingness to take a chance and accept a challenge”. Liberalism was “too intellectual and too little emotional” to be “an efficient force in history”; liberals refused to “take a chance and accept a challenge”. Liberalism's “gray spirit of compromise” was antithetical to – and smothered – “the spirit of enthusiasm, not to say fanaticism, which is so necessary to move the world out of its beaten tracks”.<sup>514</sup> Niebuhr's critique of liberalism was thus “ethical” in the sense of being focused on the sort of ethos that marked liberalism, and the sort of political action – and actors – that adherence to liberalism tended to foster. Niebuhr did not go so far as many anti-liberals in embracing and celebrating an ethos of hardness, single-mindedness, and even fanaticism, or a practice of ruthlessness. But he did suggest that the injection of some degree of this spirit into politics would better serve the causes of democracy and justice, than an ethos of moderation, tolerance, and compromise.

Following the stock market crash of 1929, Niebuhr moved closer to Marxian socialism – and continued his earlier attacks on the liberal penchant for compromise as a means of resolving conflicts – an approach which, he charged, was ineffective and ethically dubious in cases where there was a significant disproportion of power between “disinherited” groups and their exploiters and oppressors. Injustices would remain so long as the disproportion of power remains. The faith in compromise and accommodation reflected a “constitutional weakness in the liberal approach to politics”: its blindness to “the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism”, which lead those possessing power and privilege to obstinately uphold injustice.<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>514</sup> “The Twilight of Liberalism”, *The New Republic* 19, 241 (June 14, 1919), 218.

<sup>515</sup> Niebuhr, “The Pathos of Liberalism”, *The Nation* 141 (Sept 11, 1935), 303; *Moral Man and Immoral Society* [MMIS] (Scribner, 1947[1932]), xx.

*Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) set out the foundations of much of Niebuhr's political thought; it also constituted an assault on those liberal “moralists” who were unable to comprehend the complexity of human motivations and ambiguity of human achievements.<sup>516</sup> Human self-love and self-deception made “the simple distinctions between good and evil, between selfishness and altruism, with which liberal idealism has tried to estimate moral and political facts, invalid”, and the social harmony and justice envisioned by liberal reformers impossible.<sup>517</sup> Human beings possess freedom through their capacity for imagination and reasoning; this allows them to rise above the simple demands of physical nature. This capacity for freedom makes morality and creativity possible; but it is also a source of human pride, vanity, and will-to-power.<sup>518</sup> And the moral possibilities of human beings are limited by our inherent partiality or self-centeredness: no degree of reason, imagination or “intelligence” can make an individual see the needs of others as vividly as he sees his own.<sup>519</sup>

Human beings are not only self-centered and competitive, but also anxious. The human individual is anxious both because he realizes that his life is limited, dependent, and fragile; and

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<sup>516</sup> Recognizing the radicalism of the work, John Middleton Murry likened *Moral Man and Immoral Society* to *The Social Contract* and *The Communist Manifesto*, praising it as “a book for those revolutionary Socialists who have the intellectual courage to be realists and the spiritual faith to remain revolutionary.” (quoted Naveh 29).

<sup>517</sup> *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, [CLCD] (Scribners 1960 [1944]), 17, 21; see also *ibid.*, xii-xiv, 7, 10-12, 16, 27-9, 33.

<sup>518</sup> MMIS xxiv, 342; “A Critique of Pacifism”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1927, 637. For later statements of the same view, see *The Nature and Destiny of Man* [NDM] (Prentice, Hall, 1964 [1941]), Volume I, 1-3, 114, 124-5, 281; Volume II, 74; CLCD, 20; *Faith and Politics* (G. Braziller, 1968), 25; *Man's Nature and His Communities* [MNHC] (Scribner, 1965) 30-1; Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr* (Abingdon Press, 2007), 14.

<sup>519</sup> “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist”, in *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life*, ed. Larry Rasmussen (Fortress Press, 1991), 237. Cf. MMIS xxiv, 3, 20; NDM I 179.

because “he does not know the limits of his possibilities.”<sup>520</sup> To overcome anxiety we seek to bring the world under our power. This belief that we can, and may, subject the world around us – including other human beings -- to our own controlling power, is the sin of pride. Yet pride exacerbates rather than relieves anxiety: we live in anxiety that our attempts to overpower or deceive others will fail. Even when we do obtain power, we find ourselves in a position of “perilous eminence so that security is possible only by the extension of power.” Thus “every desperate effort to establish security will lead to heightened insecurity,” as well as “the evils of greed and lust for power.”<sup>521</sup>

Liberalism failed to acknowledge these “perennial sources of conflict between life and life, the inevitable tragedy of human existence, the irreducible irrationality of human behavior and the tortuous character of human history”.<sup>522</sup> As “rationalists”, liberals believed that, once those in power had been enlightened as to the injustice of their practices, they would willingly mend their ways. This was naïve; it was also patronizing and disempowering toward those disadvantaged groups struggling for justice. Liberal faith in rationality and social “technics” also betrayed an assumption that human misery came from a lack of human power. In fact, misery arose from the perversion of the human will, and increases in power did not lessen, but increased, the human capacity to inflict destruction and suffering.<sup>523</sup> Whereas liberals saw

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<sup>520</sup> NDM I, 182-3.

<sup>521</sup> MMIS 42-3; IAH 159; “Humour and Faith”, *The Essential Niebuhr*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (Yale University Press, 1986), 56.

<sup>522</sup> “The Blindness of Liberalism”, *Radical Religion* 1:4 (Autumn 1936). Niebuhr continued to reiterate these criticisms of the “serene confidence” in the possibility of social harmony of liberal (or “bourgeois”) ideology even after he had become a “Cold War liberal”: see e.g. IAH, 92-4, 145.

<sup>523</sup> MMIS xviii-ix; CRPP 106.

society as progressively transcending egoism and ignorance, modern society actually amplified individual egoism, while also subsuming the egoism of individuals into the even more virulent egoism of groups.<sup>524</sup> Benevolence is nourished by direct personal contacts, and weakens as these are attenuated. In a complex mass society a sense of justice comes to depend more on reason – the impulse toward consistency and critical scrutiny – rather than on personal benevolence. Yet reason can serve injustice as well as justice: “The will-to-power uses reason, as kings use courtiers and chaplains to add grace to their enterprise”. This will-to-power infects even devotion to causes and communities beyond the individual: in seeking to do good for other, the individual is also impelled to seek power for himself.<sup>525</sup>

Niebuhr was particularly acute in his puncturing of the ways in which ruling groups rationalized their domination in the name of preserving peace (even though such “peace” was both unjust, and based on the ruling class's own use of force);<sup>526</sup> or through the paternalist argument that rule by the elite was in the best interests of those dominated. Thus, in the “long agitation” preceding the granting of women's suffrage, “the men ... used the same arguments against their own women, which privileged groups have always used in opposition to the extension of privilege. They insisted that women were not capable of exercising the rights to which they aspired, just as dominant classes have always tried to withhold the opportunity for the exercise of rational functions from underprivileged classes and then accused them of lacking capacities which can be developed only by exercise.” The case of women's subjection also

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<sup>524</sup> MMIS, xii.

<sup>525</sup> MMIS 25-34, 40-41, 44-7; see also MNHC, 48, 51.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid., 129-39.

illustrated for Niebuhr the inextricability of political and economic power, and the need to use these coercively in order to achieve emancipation: the only effective remedy for autocratic rule within the family, Niebuhr observed, was for women to first secure economic independence – which, in turn, required securing political power in order to remove legal and economic disabilities.<sup>527</sup>

The dynamics of modern social life both perpetuated innate sinfulness, and supplemented it with a distinctively social sinfulness.<sup>528</sup> It was difficult, but possible, to establish justice in relations between individuals by means of moral suasion; but collectives were too morally “obtuse” and unimaginative to attain such moral standards. Relations between groups must be “political” rather than “ethical”, governed by relations of power rather than considerations of justice, and pursued through the instruments of coercion. Hostility toward others was “a seemingly unavoidable prerequisite of group solidarity”; this had become all the more true as societies had become larger, more impersonal, internally diverse, and complex. National communities, in particular, tended to reproduce – and amplify – the quarrelsomeness of individuals. “The very sensitive 'honor' of nations can always be appeased by the blood of its citizens[,] and no national ambition seems too base or petty to claim and to receive the support of a majority of its patriots.” This was linked to the power of “tribalism” – the divide between a “we group” and “they group”, the former of which commands loyalty, the latter of which is “outside the pale of humanity”.. Such tribalism does not check, but aids, individual will-to-power, enabling individuals and juntas to pursue wars of conquest to gratify their personal

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<sup>527</sup> MMIS 46-7. Niebuhr notes similar dynamics in the cases of class and racial oppression: *ibid.*, 118-23.

<sup>528</sup> Niebuhr subsequently conceded the validity of a colleague's remark that a better title would have been “The Not So Moral Man in His Less Moral Communities”. MNHC, 22.



”ambition and vanity”, while appealing to the ideals of democracy.<sup>529</sup>

Individual and collective pride and anxiety made conflict ineradicable. Communities require some element of coercion to maintain unity and to adjudicate between divergent and conflicting interests, philosophies and attitudes. And whenever “collective power” exploits weakness it “can never be dislodged unless power is raised against it”; those who seek justice must be ready to dirty their hands by utilizing coercive power.<sup>530</sup> Whenever peace is achieved, it is “gained by force and is always an uneasy and an unjust one”. Indeed, it is uneasy because it is unjust.<sup>531</sup> Power is needed to secure peace and fight injustice; but the possession and use of power always threatens peace, justice, and freedom. Power is a “poison”; and “[t]he man of power, though humane impulse may awaken in him, always remains something of a beast of prey;” even his generosity is “at once a display of his power and an expression of his pity. His generous impulses freeze within him if his power is challenged or his generousities are accepted without grateful humility.”<sup>532</sup> And since “[p]ower in juxtaposition with weakness is bound to cause exploitation,”<sup>533</sup> power must be set against power “until a more balanced equilibrium of power is achieved.” The goal was both egalitarian and liberal; but the means was hard-headed political struggle, which could never be resolved in a spontaneous, harmonious social order of

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<sup>529</sup> MMIS xi, xxiii, 9, 18, 24-5, 48, 88-9, 93m 107, 272; see also “Human Nature and Social Change”, *Christian Century* L (1933), 363; MNHC, 91, 93-4.

<sup>530</sup> MMIS xii, xv, 4.

<sup>531</sup> “All through history one may observe the tendency of power to destroy its very *raison d'être*. It is suffered because it achieves internal unity and creates external defenses for the nation. But it grows to such proportions that it destroys the social peace of the state by the animosities which its exactions arouse, and it enervates the sentiment of patriotism by robbing the common man of the basic privileges which might bind him to his nation.” (MMIS 11)

<sup>532</sup> MMIS 6-7, 13-14

<sup>533</sup> “Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective” (1957), *Faith and Politics*, 41.

freedom: “The force of human egoism and the limits of human imagination will make the struggle against the abuse of power a perpetual one.”<sup>534</sup> Niebuhr's social and psychological analysis thus lent weight to a “realist” picture of politics; and led Niebuhr to insist, against “utopian” aspirations, that an adequate recognition of and response to such a “realist” picture was necessary ingredient in any (potentially) successful struggle for greater justice in the world.

His awareness of the evils of power both fueled and modified Niebuhr's radicalism, leading him to insist on the necessity not only of using coercive means in the pursuit of justice, but of “endowing those who possess [power] with the largest measure of ethical self-control”, as well as “reducing power to a minimum, of bringing the remainder under the strongest measure of social control”, since “there is no ethical force strong enough to place inner checks upon the use of power its quantity is inordinate”; as Madison declared, “all men having power ought to be distrusted”.<sup>535</sup> Liberalism (as Niebuhr would maintain even after he became partly reconciled to that tradition) underestimated the strength of the “lust for power” as a factor in political life.<sup>536</sup> Yet the liberal project of setting up protections against power was one Niebuhr embraced – while warning that many liberals were too optimistic about the prospects of this project.

Niebuhr's later conclusion that any prudent and just political strategy must “invariably involve the balancing of power with power” – a balancing which can “never completely escape the peril of tyranny on the one hand, and the peril of anarchy and warfare on the other”<sup>537</sup> – was

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<sup>534</sup> *Reflections on the End of an Era*, 230; “Optimism and Utopianism”, *The World Tomorrow* Feb 22, 1933 quoted Schlesinger op. cit., 201. Cf. IAH, 31.

<sup>535</sup> MMIS 164 (quoting from *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. H. D. Gilpin, Vol II, 1073.)

<sup>536</sup> IAH, 76.

<sup>537</sup> “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist”, in Rasmussen op.cit., 238.

thus already anticipated in his early, radical writings. But in the early 1930s he placed greater emphasis on the need to challenge those who wielded predominant power on behalf of an inegalitarian *status quo*.<sup>538</sup>

His perception of injustice and its rationalizations pushed Niebuhr to favor reform; but his analysis of the psychology of domination made him suspicious of reformers. Most of us have a vested interest in the *status quo*, and so desire change less than we think we do. This self-deception about the degree to which they desired change was particularly marked among liberals. Political opinions were “inevitably rooted in economic interests of one kind or other”; liberal reformism exhibited “the typical timidity of the middle-class intellectual”, whose fear of anarchy and violence prompted a defense of existing privilege and injustice.<sup>539</sup> The proletariat, on the other hand, possessed an insight that the privileged classes lacked: those who suffered had a better sense of what was really going on than those who oppressed them – though they were also more susceptible to illusions about what could be expected from social change.<sup>540</sup> The will of the proletariat was not pure; but it was no more corrupt than that of any group, and its motives were certainly no less moral than the motives of those who defended privilege. Indeed, Niebuhr found reasons to prefer the vices of the proletariat, in what he saw as “a contest between hypocrisy and brutality, and between sentimentality and cynicism”. In the early '30s Niebuhr preferred “the devil of vengeance” to “the devil of hypocrisy”.<sup>541</sup>

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<sup>538</sup> MMIS 8; see also *ibid.* 114

<sup>539</sup> MMIS 134; see also *ibid.* 136, 178-9; cf. CLCD, 2, and IAH, 33.

<sup>540</sup> MMIS 5, 7, 114-17.

<sup>541</sup> MMIS 170, 177 (where Niebuhr quotes Trotsky's famous repudiation of “Kantian priestly and vegetarian-Quaker prattle about the 'sacredness of human life'”), 157-8, 187, 192; “Why I Leave the F. O. R.”, *Love and Justice* 259.

Niebuhr did not advocate revolutionary violence. But he did attack conventional liberal judgments against revolution, declaring that “If a season of violence can establish a just social system and can create the possibilities of its preservation, there is no purely ethical ground upon which violence and revolution can be ruled out”. There could be no absolute distinction between non-violent and violent types of coercion, or between coercion by government and that used by revolutionaries. The real question was, “what are the political possibilities of establishing justice through violence?”<sup>542</sup> This meant asking not only how effective violence would be in toppling the present order, but how likely it was to give way to a more egalitarian society. Niebuhr recognized that revolution threatened to lead to a new set of abuses by a new set of masters.<sup>543</sup> And even *if* violence could be justified in a given situation – if it, and it alone, proved to be a successful means to achieving an egalitarian society – “its terror must have the tempo of a surgeon's skill and the healing must follow quickly upon its wounds.”<sup>544</sup>

Niebuhr concluded that circumstances made it unlikely that an egalitarian society could be achieved in the Western world through revolution. The most promising route to social change lay in a combination of “moral and coercive factors” which would generate “gradual and evolutionary processes”. But the reformist, as well as the revolutionary, must recognize the difficulties and hazards of her preferred strategy. Even a restrained and modest fight against entrenched privilege through political force was liable to provoke – and be defeated by – the

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<sup>542</sup> MMIS 179.

<sup>543</sup> E.g. “What is to prevent the instruments of today's redemption from becoming the chain of tomorrow's enslavement? ... if power is needed to destroy power, how is this new power to be made ethical?” (MMIS 231)

<sup>544</sup> MMIS 220.

application of economic power or violence.<sup>545</sup> To this estimation of likely outcomes, Niebuhr added an ethical premise: justice was a higher goal than peace; violence would therefore be justified, if justice could not be achieved without resort to violence.<sup>546</sup>

But while he did not advance firm prohibitions against it, neither did Niebuhr issue a “blank check for violence”.<sup>547</sup> His goal was not to excuse revolutionary violence, but to chasten complacent liberal condemnation of radicals by pointing to the elements of self-deception and escapism at work in absolute rejection of violence – particularly when doing so meant doing nothing to correct existing injustices, which involved “subtler types of coercion”.<sup>548</sup> This tendency to aid the *status quo* was a fault not only of liberalism, but of those radicals who embraced “the principle of non-resistance”.<sup>549</sup> Such proponents of non-resistance were noble – but the price of their nobility was defeat and oppression<sup>550</sup>

Non-resistance, with its ethos of purity, had to be distinguished from a more pragmatic policy of non-violence – which, while it renounced direct violence, still involved deploying potentially coercive force, and risked the infliction of suffering on the innocent. Non-violent politics represented a middle ground between the perils of revolutionary violence, and the impotence of puristic non-resistance; it sought to economize on the coercion necessary to pursuing justice, and

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<sup>545</sup> MMIS 180-91, 206-11.

<sup>546</sup> MMIS 170, 234-5.

<sup>547</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, “Pragmatic Realism versus the American Century”, in Andrew Bacevich, ed., *The Short American Century: A Postmortem* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 104-6; see also Anon., “Putting Just Enough Poison in the Baby’s Porridge”, *New York Times Book Review*, February 5, 1933, 4.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid., 232-3.

<sup>549</sup> Quoted Fox, 79.

<sup>550</sup> MMIS 268-9.

reduce the amount of suffering arising from this pursuit, without unrealistically eschewing the use of coercion, or irresponsibly abandoning the pursuit of justice.<sup>551</sup>

This concern with dispelling the self-exalting confusions around non-violence led Niebuhr to offer a qualified critique of Gandhi. Gandhi's attempts to combine “the insights of a saint with the necessities of statecraft” qualified the purity of his ethical and religious ideals.<sup>552</sup> But that Gandhi's practice was less purely spiritual than he claimed made it *more* admirable politically: Gandhi's tactics were more acutely sensitive to the interplay of politics and morals than was (much of) his rhetoric.<sup>553</sup> And among the most realistic, as well as most ethically sensitive, of Gandhi's insight was his recognition that non-violence was not merely a matter of actions, but of the *spirit* in which actions are undertaken. At its best, non-violent resistance was a *technique* which both expressed a broader *temper* of good-will – and a discipline which protected this temper of good-will from being eroded by the bitterness bred by participation in violent conflict. The expression of the temper of good-will through appropriate action was an effective tactic in the struggle for justice: for it lessened the resentment felt by those against whom moral protest was directed: “In every social conflict each party is so obsessed with the wrongs which the other party commits against it, that it is unable to see its own wrongdoing. A non-violent temper reduces these animosities to a minimum and therefore preserves a certain objectivity in analysing the issues of the dispute.”<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>551</sup> MMIS 172, 241; “Why The Christian Church is Not Pacifist”, Rasmussen 241-2; *Love and Justice*, 249-51.

<sup>552</sup> MMIS 243-4, 269.

<sup>553</sup> For a more recent depiction of Gandhi as a political “realist”, see Karuna Mantena, “Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence”, *American Political Science Review*, 106:2 (May 2012), 455-70.

<sup>554</sup> MMIS 247-8.

Non-violence as temper also allows for the perception of a distinction between the evils of a social system, and the individuals involved in that system.<sup>555</sup> Even if this distinction cannot be wholly sustained, it is politically and morally wise to maintain it in political conduct – to give opponents the benefit of the doubt so as to reduce animosities and preserve objectivity in assessing the issues.<sup>556</sup> Finally, non-violent resistance deprives opponents of the “moral conceit” of identifying the preservation of their own power with the peace of the community as a whole. Non-violent resistance is therefore the form of political force which best reconciles the demands of politics and those of morality. Yet whether violent or non-violent methods are preferable is a pragmatic question, dependent on circumstances: the superiority of non-violent methods is general, not absolute.<sup>557</sup> In denying the purity of non-violent resistance, Niebuhr both advanced an argument for non-violence as an effective strategy for pursuing reform, which was compatible with a “realist” approach to politics; and sought to undermine absolute distinctions between non-violent and violent political action, and thus challenge the view that non-violence was *always* morally superior.

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<sup>555</sup> Here, we may note, Niebuhr qualified, without entirely retracting, the broad and angry attribution of guilt he had advanced when condemning Ford's customers.

<sup>556</sup> MMIS 248-9.

<sup>557</sup> MMIS 250-2. His advocacy of a strategy of non-violence purged of pretensions to purity, may count as Niebuhr's most significant contribution to the politics of his time, through its influence on Martin Luther King, Jr. Among Niebuhr's applications of his advocacy of pragmatic non-violence was to the struggle for civil rights for African Americans. It was, Niebuhr wrote, “hopeless for the Negro to expect complete emancipation from the menial social and economic position into which the white man has forced him, merely by trusting in the moral sense of the white race”. But it was “equally hopeless to attempt emancipation through violent rebellion”, which could only result in bloodshed, of which the African-American community would bear the brunt, and a backlash of repression. While “the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so”, the *most practical* means of *forcing* the white majority to recognize the rights of their black co-citizens was a prudently-measured combination of moral and economic pressure, which could at once assert the moral authority of the oppressed, and push the unjust majority toward change. (MMIS 252-4). King was struck by, and shared, both this insistence on the need for African-Americans to claim equal citizenship through force – and the insistence that this fore should take the form of non-violent strategies of moral and economic pressure.

Niebuhr's discussion of violence led him to confront the problem of moral ends and immoral means. Like Weber, and against Gandhi, Niebuhr rejected an identification between means and ends, whereby only just means can achieve just ends, asserting that it is not the case that "the character of immediate consequences guarantees the character of the ultimate end".<sup>558</sup> Niebuhr accepted the inescapability of "dirty hands" for the political actor: "We use evil in every moment of our existence to hold evil in check."<sup>559</sup> But he recognized that, even if coercion or injustice is sometimes necessary for success, certain sorts of coercion and injustice so infect political and moral life as to undermine the ends at which they aim.<sup>560</sup> He also (again with Weber, and against Marxist "realists") rejected the idea that there is any guarantee provided by the logic of history that violent means will achieve desired ends. Conflict and coercion are intrinsically "dangerous instruments", "fruitful of the very evils" they sought to extirpate.<sup>561</sup>

Niebuhr here trod a path between a consequentialism focused on ultimate outcomes, and something more nuanced. On the one hand, he held that "[a] political policy cannot be intrinsically evil if it can be proved to be an efficacious instrument for the achievement of a morally approved end." On the other hand, a policy could not be said to be "*wholly* good merely because it seems to make for ultimately good consequences. Immediate consequences must be weighed against the ultimate consequences. The destruction of life or the suppression of freedom result in the immediate destruction of moral values." Whether the ultimate outcome justified

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<sup>558</sup> MMIS 174; cf. "Must We Do Nothing?", *The Christian Century* (30 March 1932), 417.

<sup>559</sup> Quoted Schlesinger, 199.

<sup>560</sup> "Even if justice should be achieved by social conflicts which lack the spiritual elements of non-violence, something will be lacking in the character of the society so constructed" (MMIS 256) .

<sup>561</sup> MMIS 238.



violation of moral goods depended on the value of the end aimed at, the intrinsic value of the immediate goods sacrificed for the ultimate one, and the likelihood of attainment of the ultimate goal.<sup>562</sup>

Thus, in his early, “realist” phase Niebuhr leveled an attack on what he regarded as liberal evasion, by insisting that violence, subordination, and enforced misery were *always* part of social life. Liberalism's sin was, first, that it tended to obscure those forms of coercion that sustained existing injustices; and that it fostered the fantasy that justice could be attained without coercion. To embrace a “realist” view of human nature and politics, combined with a commitment to the ideals of justice that liberalism itself claimed to venerate, meant rejecting liberal evasions in favor of a more radical approach. However, Niebuhr's “realistic” view of human nature and politics – and, in particular, his analysis of the psychology of power and self-righteousness – also fostered doubt about political radicalism itself, pointing to the need to maintain internal or ethical, as well as external or institutional, limits on any agent's capacity for violence – and his, her, or its inclination to use violence.

### **B. Niebuhr and Pacifism: Against Purism, Self-Righteousness, and Irresponsibility**

The two over-arching, besetting sins of liberalism, in the young Niebuhr's view, were *sentimentality* about human nature and politics, and a tendency toward *purism* – that is, a strict adherence to an absolutist moral standpoint, and consequent refusal to dirty one's hands. Niebuhr identified the same faults in pacifism; as his attention shifted to Nazi and Fascist aggression in Europe, he shifted his polemical energies toward this target.<sup>563</sup> His engagement with pacifism

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<sup>562</sup> Ibid. 171.

<sup>563</sup> Niebuhr had embraced pacifism after World War I. He began moving away from it with his advocacy of non-violent coercion by the late 1920s (“A Critique of Pacifism” [1927], *Love and Justice*, 241-7), and resigned from

led him to sharpen his objections to the pursuit of moral purity, and his defense of an ethos of responsibility.

Pacifism resembled liberalism in its sentimentality; it surpassed it in its purism. Such purism was delusive: moral purity is not humanly possible; each individual and group is inwardly divided between good and evil. This was an important fact to remember so as not to fall into complacent self-righteousness; but it should not be taken as reason for refraining from action. An individual or nation's inability to attain purity did not, contrary to the supposition of purists, undermine that individual or nation's standing in condemning the even greater evils of others, or in seeking to prevent malefactors from injuring others. Thus, Niebuhr attacked the tendency among pacifists to morally equate the tyranny of fascist regimes with the tyranny practiced in the "so-called democratic nations". However much democratic nations may fall short of their ideals, it was "sheer moral perversity" to equate these "inconsistencies" (terrible as they might be) with "the brutalities which modern tyrannical States practice." All "distinctions upon which the fate of civilization has turned in the history of mankind have been just such relative distinctions" between lesser and greater evils; to refuse to make such distinctions was willful "blindness to obvious facts of human experience".<sup>564</sup>

Furthermore, the purist tendency to measure political realities "not in terms of possible

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the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1934. He continued to write extensively for the pacifist-leaning *The Christian Century* until breaking with it over its opposition to World War II in 1940 (Niebuhr, "Why I Leave the F.O.R.", *Love and Justice*, 254-9; "To Prevent the Triumph of an Intolerable Tyranny", *ibid.*, 272-8; Gary B. Bullert, "Reinhold Niebuhr and *The Christian Century*: World War II and the Eclipse of the Social Gospel." *Journal of Church and State* 2002 44(2); Brown, 98-102). See also Colm McKeogh, *The Political Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr: A Pragmatic Approach to Just War* (Macmillan, 1997), 19-37.

<sup>564</sup> "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist", 245, 248-9, 252; PSA 39. This points suggests a refinement of Niebuhr's own earlier accusation that all members of capitalist society were guilty of the miseries suffered by workers and the poor: while all might bear responsibility and thus blame, it was also important to discriminate between different degrees of guilt and blameworthiness.

historical alternatives, but by comparison with purely ideal possibilities” was a “fatal weakness in the realm of politics”, where goals and values are always relative to conditions, and where choices are always between outright evils and deeply flawed approximations of goods. Denial of this “obvious fact” fostered an “attitude of irresponsibility” – as well, paradoxically, as a “spirit of cynicism”. Purism does not allow for the balancing and discrimination which are necessary to preserve “some relative decency and justice in society against the tyranny and injustice into which society may fall.” While all governments and individuals are sinful, not all are equally guilty.

We never have the chance to choose between pure tyranny and pure freedom; we can only choose between tyranny and relative democracy. We do not have the choice between war and perfect peace, but only between war and the uneasy peace of some fairly decent and stable equilibrium of social forces. We cannot choose between violence and non-violence, but only between violence and a statesmanship which seeks to adjust social forces without violence but cannot guarantee immunity from clashes. We have never had the opportunity – and probably never will have – to choose between injustice and perfect equality, but only between injustice and a justice which moves toward equality and incorporates some of its values.

The absolutist's refusal to participate in the “relativities” of politics because they represent “imperfect approximations of the ideal of human brotherhood” was “bound to lead to a further disintegration” of the “always tentative peace” and imperfect justice that politics can, at best, achieve.<sup>565</sup> To avoid moral pollution or guilt entirely was to flee moral responsibilities to one's fellows. There could be no completely and simply “blameless” life.<sup>566</sup> Not only was purity unattainable; the longing to escape from the impurity – the guilt, regret, and anxiety – in which political life involves the morally sensitive was itself an expression of self-absorption. And the

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<sup>565</sup> “Idealists as Cynics”, 72-3; *Love and Justice*, 261, 267; NDM 219-27.

<sup>566</sup> PSA, 4, 103, 118, 122; IAH, 19; “Why I Leave the F.O.R.”, *Christian Century*, January 3 1934, 19; *Love and Justice*, 268, 270, 280; *Faith and Politics* 56; NDM II, 284.

(false) belief that one had attained some measure of purity – that one's hands were clean – represented a covert spiritual vanity, which was all the more dangerous for being clothed in pretenses to virtue.

As this suggests, Niebuhr's attacks on purism were closely tied to one of the paramount elements in his thought: his sensitivity and opposition to self-righteousness” particularly that ultimate self-righteousness that consists in “the identification of our relative political and moral perspectives with the absolute will of God”. This was “sin in its quintessential form” – the sin of pride combined with the sin of *idolatry*, which consists in confusing worldly authorities with ultimate authority, worldly ends with the ultimate end of human striving, and our own judgments, or those of any human agency, with the final and true judgment.<sup>567</sup>

Self-righteousness was particularly dangerous in those who wielded political power.<sup>568</sup> For this reason, there was value, as well as danger, in the condemnation of the corruptions and compromises of politics by moral purists. But those who would uphold the prophetic duty to speak criticism to power must eschew irresponsibly unrealistic demands and sentimental gestures that gratify our own sense of moral stature but make little positive difference. Political leaders require scrutiny; but they also merit some charity, for they must contend with “the limitations of human society which ...the prophet need not, consider.”<sup>569</sup> The recognition that we are all involved in sin should encourage both a critical attitude toward those who profess to represent virtue, and an awareness that even as we are critical of them, we too are likely guilty of

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<sup>567</sup> *Love and Justice*, 286-7; cf. NDM I, 205-18. See also Schlesinger 199.

<sup>568</sup> “Roosevelt and Johnson: A Contrast in Foreign Policy”, *New Leader* 48:15 (July 19, 1965), 7.

<sup>569</sup> *Leaves*, xii-iv. Cf. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 23; Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 377, 298.

moral pretension. Niebuhr accordingly guarded against the tendency of the prophetic moral critic to become self-righteous in his critiques of the self-righteousness of others.

Niebuhr was wary of the temptation to self-righteousness facing not only pacifists, but also defenders of just war. Having spoken tirelessly on behalf of American intervention in World War II, Niebuhr found himself ambivalent about the rhetoric and ethos of the war effort. He feared that conviction of the righteousness of their cause would blind supporters of the war to the horror – some of it necessary, some of it not – that attends all war. Thus, even as he renounced pacifism, he warned that those who were willing to engage in the business of war and coercion for the sake of justice need the prophetic testimony of moral absolutists, “lest we become callous to the horror of war, and lest we forget the ambiguity of our own actions and motives” – though “we have a right to remind the absolutists that their testimony against us would be more effective if it were not corrupted by self-righteousness”.<sup>570</sup> Niebuhr also blanched at the portrayal of the struggle against Nazism as a crusade of good against evil. While Nazism was certainly evil, the Allies did not represent an ultimate good – as was made painfully clear by America's institutionalized racism, evidenced both in its treatment of African-Americans, and its internment of Japanese-Americans (which Niebuhr outspokenly denounced). In identifying themselves with ultimate good the Allies presumed a righteousness that threatened to lead them to error and sin. The mentality of crusading also fostered an over-ambitious – indeed, millenarian – vision for post-war reconstruction.<sup>571</sup>

On Niebuhr's account purism or absolutism had two faces, one self-exalting, the other

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<sup>570</sup> “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist”, 253.

<sup>571</sup> Quoted Naveh, 83; see also *ibid.*, 80-83.

self-abasing. Sin may lie either in the prideful denial of – or the despairing (or self-exculpating) acquiescence to – human limitation. Outward pride often masks an inner despair; despair inspires a desperate self-assertion.<sup>572</sup> The corruptions, compromises and brutalities of political life “must drive pure moralists either to despair or to the fury of self-righteousness”. Those who do not fall into despair, who remain dedicated to an ideal of purity in the face of an impure world, are tempted to become either “irresponsibles” (to borrow Archibald MacLeish's term) who convince themselves that they must refrain from action until they can act purely; or “pharisees”, who convince themselves that they are pure (and so can act with a clear conscience), and identify their own cause with absolute righteousness.<sup>573</sup> The latter course was not unknown among liberals, who were too quick to defend the unjust and ineffective Western democracies in absolute terms. But its most dangerous expression in the contemporary world, Niebuhr came to believe, was in anti-liberal creeds of the Left and the Right. Niebuhr thus found himself drawn back to liberalism – but to a much sterner, more “realistic” brand of liberalism.

### **C. A (Partial) Return to Liberalism: Niebuhr's Critiques of Utopianism and Fanaticism**

Events from the mid-1930s on confirmed many of Niebuhr's objections to liberalism, and mitigated his rejection of it. The ultimate refutation of liberal hopes came from Communism – a foe which “transmuted ideals and hopes, which we most deeply cherish, into cruel realities

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<sup>572</sup> MNHC 118; cf. Daniel Malotky, *Reinhold Niebuhr's Paradox: Paralysis, Violence, and Pragmatism* (Lexington Books, 2012), 59-60; NDM I:180-81; *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Seabury Press, 1979 [1935]), 62-70.

<sup>573</sup> *Love and Justice*, 294; “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist”, 252; cf MMIS, 71, 75-6, 81. In the period leading up to U. S. entry into World War II, Niebuhr identified each of these faces of purism with contemporary political tendencies. Socialists and pacifists judged all present realities by impossible standards, and refused to make “discriminate” judgments between different imperfect regimes and courses of action. Even more dangerously, Communists and (isolationist) “national patriots” not only took an absolutist stance, but falsely claimed that perfection had actually been achieved (or was imminently to be achieved), either in the Soviet Union, or their own nation (“Idealists as Cynics”, 72-3).

which we most fervently abhor”, so that the “evils against which we contend are frequently the fruit of illusions which are similar to our own.” Where liberalism was devoted to an ideal of “a society in which the morally embarrassing factor of power has been pushed under the rug”, Communism proposed “one final, resolute and unscrupulous thrust of power”, which would “purge the world of evil” and “establish a society in which no coercive power will be necessary”.<sup>574</sup> While he continued to reiterate his critique of liberal sentimentality, Niebuhr also argued that a proper understanding of the causes and consequences of Communism's crimes offered a vindication of many of the central elements of liberal-democratic practice – and revealed the dangers of the radical position to which he had been (ambivalently) drawn.

Even during his embrace of Marxism in the 1930s, Niebuhr had attacked the Communist belief that dictatorship was a merely transitory stage. Experience of human conduct suggested that Communist elites would not relinquish power – and that the proletarian impulse to vengeance was likely to give rise to a “relentless vindictiveness” toward surviving “class enemies”.<sup>575</sup> Visiting Moscow in 1930, Niebuhr perceived the Soviets embracing a technocratic authoritarianism which left ordinary people politically ignorant and powerless; and detected behind the self-sacrifice of individual Russians a collective “lust for power” akin in spirit to the individual greed of capitalism. Russian dynamism, however impressive, was “shot through with brutality” and “fanaticism”. Four years later, Niebuhr criticized Communism's single-minded pursuit of political success, which fostered a “consistent inhumanity”; by the next year, he had

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<sup>574</sup> IAH, 3, 11, 14-15, 16; see also *ibid.*, xxiv.

<sup>575</sup> MMIS 157-8; see also *ibid.*, 167, 192-8.; see also “The Religion of Communism”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1931. Cf. IAH 164-6; *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (Scribner, 1953), 38-9, 46-8, 107; PSA 45; MNHC 38.

concluded that the Marxist “illusion” had “endow[ed] a group of oligarchs with ... religious sanctity”.<sup>576</sup>

For Niebuhr, the enormities of Stalinist rule were not unique to Communism, but characteristic of “all forms of government which rely on indiscriminate formulae” and “absolute distinctions between friend and enemy in both domestic and foreign affairs.”<sup>577</sup> Yet the particular “ethos of the communist society” also reflected the “utopian illusions” of Marxism: the belief that conflict was the result of particular social relations, so that harmony could be achieved through social transformation – of which the Communists were, naturally, the agents. This identification with the cause of history, and of the wronged and messianic proletariat, obscured Communist leaders' own power-lust, and made them regard themselves as “innocent of any evil”. These illusions were the basis of communism’s moral appeal, and thus its danger: they allowed communists to “exploit every moral and political weakness of the civilized world as if they had the conscience of civilization in their keeping”, thus providing a “moral façade for the most unscrupulous political policy.” As a result, the Kremlin's “ruthless power operates behind a screen of pretended ideal ends” – a situation which was both “more dangerous and more evil than pure cynical defiance of moral ends,” since it fed a “fierce self-righteousness”.<sup>578</sup>

Niebuhr attacked Communism for its utopianism; but rejection of utopianism did not

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<sup>576</sup> “The Land of Extremes”, *The Christian Century*, October 15, 1930, 1243; “Russia Makes the Machine Its God”, *The Christian Century*, September 10, 1930, 1080-81; “The Church in Russia”, *The Christian Century*, September 24 1930, 1145-46; “The Problem of Communist Religion”, *The World Tomorrow* July 16, 1934, 379; “Religion and Marxism”, *Modern Monthly*, February 1935 (quoted Schlesinger 203). See also *Reflections on the End of an Era* (Scribners, 1934) 243-4. Niebuhr nevertheless remained committed to the Popular Front, and even defended Stalin's geopolitical “realism”. It was the Nazi-Soviet Pact, not the Moscow Trials, that made Niebuhr an unambivalent anti-Communist (Fox 184-90).

<sup>577</sup> “Beria and McCarthy”, *The New Leader*, January 4, 1954, 3.

<sup>578</sup> CRPP 36-8; IAH 3, 20-22, 65.



make him a liberal. *Both* liberalism and communism rested on “utopian” faiths: a faith in redemption through progressive evolution, and a faith in redemption through revolution.<sup>579</sup> The difference between the two ideologies was that between “soft” and “hard” utopianism. “Hard utopians” believe that they have *achieved* perfection, that they “embody the perfect community”, and therefore “feel themselves morally justified in using every instrument of guile or force against those who oppose their assumed perfection”. “Soft utopians” “expect perfection to emerge out of the ongoing process of history”, but do not claim to have achieved it themselves. Belief in their own “innocency”, and in the attainability of utopia, had nourished self-assured fury on the part of “hard” utopians, and sanguine passivity on the part of “soft” utopians.<sup>580</sup> In the 1930s, ranking justice over peace, and frustrated with the impotence or complacency of American liberals, Niebuhr had taken pains to balance attacks on one type of utopianism with attacks on the other; he had also voiced a preference for the toughness and vigor of Communism, despite its dangers. In the face of totalitarian horrors, he changed his mind about the relative dangers of liberalism's “gray spirit of compromise” and the “fanaticism” of the Communists, who believed that in serving an “unambiguously ideal end” they were justified in using “any means without scruple”.<sup>581</sup> Niebuhr continued to oppose both “hard” and “soft” utopianism; but he came to see the former as the far greater immediate danger.<sup>582</sup>

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<sup>579</sup> *Politics*, 12-13.

<sup>580</sup> “Two Forms of Utopianism”, *Christianity and Society*, 12:4 (Autumn 1947), excerpted, with additional material, in *Politics*, 12-13; IAH, 4.

<sup>581</sup> IAH 5-6.

<sup>582</sup> Niebuhr nevertheless remained critical of classical liberalism: thus he avowed that one of the deleterious effects of Communism was that its obvious evils gave complacent classical liberals “good pretexts for not repenting of their own sins” (CRPP 107).

Growing sensitivity to the dangers of “hard utopianism” led Niebuhr to affirm the “*values of liberalism*”. These included the view that political communities are organized by the consent of the governed; that individuals are ends in themselves; that liberty and equality are both norms of political and social life; that, given conditions of pluralism, toleration is a virtue; that the use of force in human affairs should be reduced as much as is possible, given the demands of these other norms; and that politics should be used to regulate economics and reduce material inequality. Having identified liberalism with complacent defense of the *status quo*, he now reconceived of liberalism as committed to the cause of *victims* of the *status quo*.<sup>583</sup>

Niebuhr also came to appreciate and embrace liberalism's concern with the dangers of absolute power, which resulted in “evils which are worse than [other sorts of] injustice,” in that they morally corroded both those with power and those subjected to it.<sup>584</sup> Indeed, “irresponsible and uncontrolled power is the greatest source of injustice”. The “perils of uncontrolled power are perennial reminders of the virtues” of liberal democracy.<sup>585</sup> There is “no perfectly adequate method of preventing either anarchy or tyranny”. But liberal democracy offers the best method for steering between these shoals; and it should be “obvious” that “any social structure in which power has been made responsible, and in which anarchy has been overcome by methods of mutual accommodation, is preferable to either anarchy or tyranny.” The experiences of totalitarianism should be enough to teach us not to “lightly sacrifice the virtues of democracy for

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<sup>583</sup> Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr*, 75. This list of liberal “values”, or premises, is my paraphrase of Stone's paraphrase of Niebuhr's lecture notes. See also PSA 61-4, 66, 75; Fox, 282.

<sup>584</sup> CRPP34-6; PSA 18.

<sup>585</sup> CLCD, xiii-xiv; cf. MNHC, 66-8.

the sake of escaping its defects.”<sup>586</sup>

Niebuhr's growing identification with a distinctly liberal conception of democracy reflected a recalibration of his priorities, in which the values of peace and justice were held in a pluralistic tension, rather than justice being ranked above peace: the capacity of a passion for justice to lead to strife, suffering, and *injustice* now weighed heavier on Niebuhr's mind.<sup>587</sup> But this return to liberalism was also made possible by a change in the nature of American liberalism itself – a change which Niebuhr had done much to effect. Liberalism had come to be associated not with economic *laissez-faire*, nor with belief in spontaneous progress, but with a hard-headed pragmatism and embrace of conflictual, interest-group politics as a means to reform. After World War II, liberal intellectuals were at pains to disassociate themselves from the faith in human rationality and benevolence, and optimistic expectations about the pace and extent of social change, for which Niebuhr had rebuked earlier liberals; this was linked to a rejection of pacifism (seen as discredited by failed responses to Nazi aggression in the 1930s), and embrace of a “tougher” – though still temperate, rather than hastily bellicose – stance in foreign policy. The shift was articulated by Niebuhr's disciple Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who contrasted the “progressives”, whose naïve meliorism had blinded them both to the difficulties of internal reform, and the evils of Communism with the “liberals” of the New Deal and the post-war period – with their mix of psychological “realism” and wariness of power, sense of “responsibility”, and awareness of the difficulties and frustrations, as well as the importance, of

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<sup>586</sup> “Why The Christian Church is Not Pacifist”, 250-51.

<sup>587</sup> The perception of the dangers of a hypertrophied sense of justice was pungently voiced by Niebuhr's friend W. H. Auden: “Whoever suffers from the malady of being unable to endure any injustice, must never look out of the window, but stay in his room with the door shut. He would also do well, perhaps, to throw away his mirror” (Auden, *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (Faber and Faber, 1970), 207.

political struggle. If during and after the war Niebuhr (re)turned to liberalism, American liberalism had moved to meet him.<sup>588</sup>

#### **D. Against the Vices of Power: Niebuhr's Continuing Radicalism**

There is a widespread perception that between the early 1930s and the start of the Cold War Niebuhr underwent a transformation from radical social critic to defender of the domestic and international *status quo* of mid-century American empire.<sup>589</sup> This (often disapproving) picture neglects both the affinities with liberalism of Niebuhr's earlier radicalism, and the continuing radical edge of his stance during the Cold War.

Niebuhr viewed the Cold War as a competition between two “innocent millennial utopias”, both of which presumed to be “world savers”. Surveying the (t)errors of Communism, Niebuhr had the “uneasy feeling” that “*our* dreams of managing history might have resulted in similar cruelties,” had they not been limited by democratic practice. And even with democratic procedures in place, Americans must beware the temptation to meet the “foe's self-righteousness with a corresponding fury of our own”. There was a danger that “a frantic anti-communism” might become “so similar in its temper of hatefulness to communism itself, the difference in the respective creeds being unable to prevent the similarity in spirit”. Indeed, “if we should perish, the ruthlessness of the foe would be only the secondary cause of the disaster. The primary cause would be that the strength of a giant nation was directed by eyes too blind to see all the hazards of the struggle” because of its “hatred and vainglory” and “pride and self-righteousness”. To

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<sup>588</sup> See Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*. On this shift in liberalism, see Mattson, *When America Was Great*.

<sup>589</sup> Thus, Cornel West has called Niebuhr an “organic intellectual of the corporate liberal establishment” whose ideas were “skillfully deployed in the service of an Europeanist ideology that promoted U.S. hegemony in the world.” (West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 163; idem., *Prophetic Fragments* [Eerdmans, 1988], 144; and see ibid 145-54). See also Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (Norton 1997[1965]), 289-90, 299-303.

protect against disaster, there was a need to cultivate a “sense of modesty about the virtue, wisdom and power available to us”, and a “sense of contrition about the common human frailties and foibles which lie at the foundation of both the enemy's demonry and our vanities”.<sup>590</sup> Much of Niebuhr's post-war work was accordingly concerned, not with Communist wickedness, but with combating the “mood of self-congratulation and complacency to which a rich and powerful nation is tempted”.<sup>591</sup>

Beyond complacency over the justness of their own intentions and domestic practices, Niebuhr warned against two sorts of folly in international affairs into which he saw his countrymen being drawn: isolationism, and adventurism or imperialism.<sup>592</sup> Both reflected a desire to have everything under one's control, and a prideful assumption that this control would be benevolent and wise. This led to a denial of responsibility by isolationists and pacifists, and a denial of limits by crusading anti-communists.<sup>593</sup> Niebuhr was ready to acknowledge (or attribute) morally worthy intentions to advocates of what amounted to isolationism or imperialism, even as he attacked them for failing to live up to the ethical demands of politics. The intentions and aims of the “contrasting idealists” – bellicose anti-communist moralists, and

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<sup>590</sup> IAH 3, 19-20, 170, 173-4; PSA 40; CRPP 30.

<sup>591</sup> “Favorable' Environments”, *Messenger*, August 18, 1953, 6, quoted by Roger Shinn, contribution to Scott op. Cit., 96. See also *Love and Justice* 233; IAH 69, 134, 146, 170, 173; *The Structure of Nations and Empires*, 282, for further warnings of America's “messianic” delusions and tendency toward impatience with the recalcitrance of history.

<sup>592</sup> Niebuhr's concern with international relations – *both* with the dangers of Communism, and of American arrogance – did lead him, it must be stressed, to be insufficiently critical – and focused on uncomfortable details – in one crucial area: the treatment of African-Americans in the United States. Here Niebuhr was ultimately supportive of the Civil Rights Movement – but was initially hesitant and distracted in giving such support, and recognizing the struggle for African-Americans' rights as a central issue for American society.

<sup>593</sup> CRPP 54; cf. IAH 131; “American Conservatism and the World Crisis”, *Yale Review* 40:3 (March 1951); Martin Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue: Reinhold Niebuhr and American Intellectual Culture* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 204; Naveh 109.

pacifists or advocates of reconciliation with communism – “may be purer than ours. We cannot claim greater moral purity; but perhaps we may claim to possess a wisdom which is more relevant to our two-pronged predicament.”<sup>594</sup> In order to take up the global role that events had thrust upon them, Americans had to learn to recognize the moral complexity of the choices which they faced – and to accept the likelihood, frustrating to a nation used to getting its way, that in some situations there could be no happy outcome.<sup>595</sup>

While in his debates with pacifists and isolationists in the 1930s and '40s Niebuhr had been more concerned with the dangers of an irresponsible flight from engagement in global affairs, he now came to focus more on the opposite error, warning that the “previous moralism of the nation” – the identification of isolation with “innocence” – had been “transmuted” into “an even simpler moralism”, resting on a “too-simple picture of righteousness in conflict with evil”. In their self-righteousness, “the so-called ‘free nations’” had forgotten “their rather ruthless power politics of the nineteenth century” – and preferred to obscure the fact that they had only recently emancipated their colonies, and had done so only because “post-war weakness and weariness had made continued rule impossible”<sup>596</sup> Americans were prone to the delusion that they simply could not be “imperialistic” – that in Woodrow Wilson’s words, America was “the most unselfish of all nations”. This “obviously absurd” myth had been refuted by American history in nineteenth century, which showed how democratic ideals could be used as cover for the impulse

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<sup>594</sup> *Christian Century* December 2, 1953, 1388, quoted Bennett op.cit., 111n17; CRPP 30; “For Peace We Must Risk War”, *Life* 25:12 (September 20, 1948), 38.

<sup>595</sup> “Hubris”, ; *Christianity and Society*, 16:2 (Spring 1951), 4-6, quoted in Naveh, 110; see also *ibid*,m 108-9.

<sup>596</sup> PASA 51, 55-6, 58-9.

to increase dominion and power.<sup>597</sup> Even leaving aside their own impure record, Americans had to remember that “the contest with Communism, particularly in Asia and Africa, is conducted against the background of previous 'imperialism' by the white nations and ... our cause is gravely imperiled by residual resentments against ... the white man's arrogance toward the colored people. Any policy that corrects and expiates past evils is both morally and politically correct and better than undue reliance on military force.”<sup>598</sup> Niebuhr feared that, to the contrary, Americans such as John Foster Dulles and Henry Luce had proudly embraced – and sinfully reveled in – “the new white man's burden.”<sup>599</sup>

Niebuhr's awareness of both the complications introduced into Cold War policy by the legacy of colonialism, and the dangers of arrogance and desire for control, informed his response to America's involvement in Vietnam. Niebuhr had initially been ambivalent about Vietnam. The balance between his doubts about American intervention (and his recognition of the authoritarianism and moral iniquity of the Diem regime) and his fear of Vietnam (and, potentially, the rest of South Asia) falling to Communist invasion began to tip against the war in 1965; by 1967 he was seeking to organize broad-based opposition to “this rather horrible and futile war”.<sup>600</sup> Vietnam failed to meet the conditions of a just war: a “good prospect of success”, and proportionality of the means to the ends. Whatever the U.S.'s reasons for involvement in Vietnam, none of its avowed goals could justify the “abhorrent” use of chemical warfare.<sup>601</sup>

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<sup>597</sup> MNHC 69-70.

<sup>598</sup> *Love and Justice*, 299.

<sup>599</sup> Quoted Fox, 202.

<sup>600</sup> Fox 1986, 17-18; Niebuhr, letter to Joe Rauh, November 6 1967, quoted Halliwell, 213; see also *ibid.*, 213-14.

<sup>601</sup> Niebuhr interviewed by Ronald H. Stone, *Christianity and Crisis* 29 (March 17 1969), 50.

Niebuhr came to distrust the Johnson administration, attacking it for issuing “a series of obvious fictions”, and for uncritically believing its own policies and personnel to represent a “conjunction of power and virtues”.<sup>602</sup>

Niebuhr did not hesitate to condemn violent protest by student radicals who acted out of a “combination of self-righteous perfectionism and a sense of impotence”; such behavior could only “complicate rather than cure the problems” which provoked it.<sup>603</sup> But he also recognized the anger of the New Left as a reaction against a “culture which boasts only of affluence and technical efficiency, but has failed to achieve moral integrity and humanness;”<sup>604</sup> he acknowledged that America's wealth made “our religious anti-Communism particularly odious. Perhaps there is not much to choose between Communist and anti-Communist fanaticism, particularly when the latter, combined with our wealth, has caused us stumble into the most pointless, costly, and bloody war in our history.”<sup>605</sup>

Niebuhr's sympathy for the Left reflected his own continuing preoccupation (throughout the period when he had supposedly become a defender of the *status quo*) with “the indifference and callousness with which we treat the sufferings and the insecurity of the poor”.<sup>606</sup> He was particularly critical of Christian leaders who abandoned what he saw as their prophetic duty to warn victorious nations and powerful classes against the dangers of vanity. Accordingly, in 1969

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<sup>602</sup> “Roosevelt and Johnson: A Contrast in Foreign Policy”, *New Leader* 48:15 (July 19, 1965), 7.

<sup>603</sup> Quoted Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 238.

<sup>604</sup> “Indicting Two Generations”, *The New Leader* 53:19 (October 5 1970), 13-14.

<sup>605</sup> *The Christian Century*, December 31, 1969, quoted Bennett, 136.

<sup>606</sup> “Prayer”, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, 73.



he attacked President Nixon, Billy Graham, and J Edgar Hoover as “high priests in the cult of complacency”, who brought together “religious sanctity and political power” in “a heady mixture for status quo conservatism”. Against their “conforming religion”, Niebuhr invoked the model of the Biblical prophets, and the late Martin Luther King. King carried on the true tradition of Amos, from whom he took his favorite Biblical passage (which Niebuhr quoted): “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an everflowing stream.”<sup>607</sup>

This late-life adoption of a prophetic voice might appear to represent a departure from Niebuhr's “Christian realist” mission of dispelling “moralistic illusions”.<sup>608</sup> Some of Niebuhr's contemporaries thought so: his fellow theologian Paul Ramsey lamented that in his criticisms of the Vietnam War Niebuhr was acting “as if Reinhold Niebuhr never existed”. This was unfair – and not only because the war represented, not a “realistic” foreign policy, but the sort of crusading hubris Niebuhr had long warned against. It was also inaccurate, for Niebuhr had long warned against a “too consistent political realism” (or “pessimism”). Such “realism”, like too-consistent idealism, represented a denial of a complex reality, an escape into simplicity achieved at the cost of neglecting the limited but persistent human capacity to transcend sheer self-interest and self-love, and recognize moral obligations to others.<sup>609</sup> “Modern ‘realists’”, Niebuhr asserted, “know the power of collective self-interest ... but they do not understand its blindness”.<sup>610</sup>

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<sup>607</sup> “The King's Chapel and the King's Court”, Rasmussen 269-70, 272.

<sup>608</sup> MMIS xxv.

<sup>609</sup> Thus, reacting against James Burnham, Niebuhr remarked that “One may question whether a cynical reaction to the moral sentimentality of our culture is much more mature than the sentimentality” (“Study in Cynicism”, *The Nation* 156:18 [May 1, 1943], 637). See also e.g. *Love and Justice*, 293-4; MNHC 43-5; CRPP 127, 129.

<sup>610</sup> CRPP 146. On this issue see See Robert C. Good, “The National Interest and Political Realism: Niebuhr's

Adherents of *raison d'etat* gave insufficient weight to morality, the starting-point of which was a recognition of the equal worth of others –and thus, of the claims imposed by their interests. Moral action, whether in foreign policy or personal life, must consider the interests of all those who affected by the act.<sup>611</sup>

This reflected a larger philosophical difference between Niebuhr and other “realists” regarding the relation between politics and morality. Niebuhr did not regard politics as “autonomous” from morality; the relationship between politics and morality was one of complex and ambiguous intertwining, rather than tidy separation.<sup>612</sup> “Social morality” must take into account both the fundamental, immutable claims of all human beings to freedom and equality (which can never be achieved perfectly, but are significant as “regulative principles of justice”); and the realities of power and interest (which are irrelevant to considerations of “pure morality”, but inescapable in political morality). There were two wrong ways of connecting politics and morality: to regard moral commitments as irrelevant to political action; or to regard every political decision as “simply derived” from morality, thus ignoring the moral ambiguity of all political positions and actions. In politics “forces which are morally dangerous must be used despite their peril”; but that peril, and the immorality of the forces, must be recognized – and could only be recognized by assuming the perspective of a morality that transcended the realities of power-relations.<sup>613</sup>

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'Debate' with Morgenthau and Kennan”, *Journal of Politics*, 22:4 (November 1960), 597-619; Ronald H. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (Abingdon Press, 1971), 203.

<sup>611</sup> Stone, *Prophet* 199-200.

<sup>612</sup> MMIS 237-8; see also “The Response of Reinhold Niebuhr”, in Harold R. Landon, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice of Our Time* (Seabury Press, 1962), 122; Stone, *Prophet*, 202-3.

<sup>613</sup> *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*, ed. Harry R. Davis and Robert C. Good (Scribners, 1960), 327-8; “Idealism,

One dangerous implication of realism was an acquiescence to – or defense of – collective egoism or chauvinism as politically normative. Another danger arose from the convergence of a “realist” view of politics as a realm of “total depravity”, with a moralistic rejection of such depravity. Such a view could not deal “with the actualities of politics, which represent bewildering mixtures of idealism and self-interest, of the sense of justice and the inclination to injustice.” It promoted a political morality “fashioned for the catacombs”, which “has little relation to the task of transfiguring the natural stuff of politics by the grace and wisdom of the Gospel”.<sup>614</sup>

Excessive “realism” was also, Niebuhr charged, a threat to democracy: it encouraged authoritarianism by suggesting that most men needed to be ruled by unquestionable political authority in order to prevent society from falling into chaos.<sup>615</sup> In doing so, excessive realists unrealistically placed their hopes in the ability of the rulers, whose own fallibility it tended to ignore. This critique of faith in the adequacy of an enlightened elite set Niebuhr apart from other post-war American “realists”, such as Walter Lipmann, George F. Kennan, and Hans Morgenthau.<sup>616</sup>

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Realism, and Christian Responsibility”, Rasmussen, 126-7. I return to these themes in the conclusion to this study.

<sup>614</sup> CRPP 195-6. This recognition of the link between excessive realism and purism was illustrated by Augustine, whose “very realistic” perception of human society as a “compact of injustice”, maintained by strife Niebuhr found “marred by a note of defeatism” resulting from Augustine’s “dualist” tendency to view the injustices of society in relation to a starkly absolute moral ideal – so that his religion “degenerates into an asocial quest for the absolute”. (MMIS 70, 78; CRPP 140).

<sup>615</sup> Niebuhr was here thinking of Hobbes, and of Luther’s views on political authority, as well as of contemporary elitist and authoritarian thought.

<sup>616</sup> See CLCD, 43-6; MNHC, 56-8.; “A Matter of Popular Will”, *New York Times Book Review*, February 20, 1955. It should be acknowledged that Niebuhr, like many other Anglophiliac mid-century American liberals, had a soft spot for the traditional political elite of Britain (one wonders if he had read Orwell’s *The Lion and the Unicorn*); such a *traditional* elite, he seems to have believed, was less inclined to hubris than an elite of “experts”.

Against the unscrupulousness and moral insensitivity validated by a “realist” exaltation of self-interest and sundering of politics and justice, Niebuhr asserted the validity and relevance of a morality that transcended political expediency; against faith in the saving power of authority and expertise, he asserted the importance of skepticism of and checks on power; against the despair and puristic withdrawal suggested by pessimistic estimations of human potential, he voiced the importance of hope. Earlier in his career, indeed, he acknowledged the necessity of a degree of utopianism, since “justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul”.<sup>617</sup>

An “adequate political morality” must do justice to the insights of both realists and moralists; it will seek to save society from “endless cycles of futile conflict”, while accepting that the best that can be hoped for is to reduce conflict and coercion to a minimum. This can be achieved, first, through employing only “such types of coercion as are most compatible with the moral and rational factors in human society”; and by fine discrimination between the purposes and ends for which coercion is used. A balance of “realism” about the limits of human virtue and possibility, and “idealism” about the importance and possibility of pursuing a greater if still imperfect justice,<sup>618</sup> was necessary. The peace of the world must be gained by strife, as

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Nevertheless, his general sensitivity to the complacency of elites tempered this “Burkean” element in his thought – a point not always adequately stressed by those who, critically or admiringly, stress the “conservative” or “Burkean” elements in Niebuhr's outlook. (Emile Lester, “British Conservatism and American Liberalism in Mid-Twentieth Century: Burkean Themes in Niebuhr and Schlesinger”, *Polity* [forthcoming; posted online April 7 2014])

<sup>617</sup> MMIS 277.

<sup>618</sup> Niebuhr distinguished between perfect justice, which was identical with love – that is, a complete lack of selfishness or partiality; and human or political justice, understood as the the greatest realization of the values of liberty and equality that can be achieved within a particular society, within a given historical moment. Love inspires the pursuit of justice, but also always goes beyond it; human justice reaches towards the ideal of love, but always falls short. See Stone, *Prophet*, 231-3. On the relationship of love and justice, and the nature of each, see “Why The Christian Church is Not Pacifist”, 240-41, 247-50; NDM II, 246-7, 253; CRPP 146-8, 160-61,

Augustine noted. It must therefore always be an imperfect one. But it need not be as imperfect as it is: “the future of society is served best if we accept the limitations of the human imagination, recognise that it cannot be extended too far beyond the actual experiences of an individual or a class; but bend every effort to increase its penetration”.<sup>619</sup> If the “children of darkness” were right, justice would be impossible; if the “children of light” were right, it would (given certain attainable conditions) be inevitable.<sup>620</sup> But it is neither: it is a standard that can be approximated, in thought and in practice, but which can never be perfectly attained.

Both moral sentimentality and moral pessimism threatened political liberty, the one because it convinces people that there is no need to check the power of government, the second because it believes that only absolute political authority can restrain the anarchy that arises from conflicting interests. Against both tendencies, Niebuhr famously asserted that “Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”<sup>621</sup> This inclination toward injustice necessitated not only a democratic limitation and balance of power, but the exercise of a vigilant *ethos* that preserved both sober realism, and prophetic criticism.

### **E. Niebuhr as Ethicist and Ethoist of Chastened Democratic Liberalism**

Niebuhr's return to liberalism was linked to an appreciation not only of the structure and procedures of American constitutional government, but of the “spirit” of liberalism, which predated and transcended the bourgeois ideology of which he remained critical. This was a spirit

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167, 171, 173; PSA 92-4; *Faith and Politics*, 30-31; *Love and Justice* 283.

<sup>619</sup> MMIS 230, 234, 256.

<sup>620</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 45.

<sup>621</sup> CLCD, viii; see also CLCD xii-iv.

of tolerance, fairness, and concern for individual liberty; it was a spirit that civilized politics, and so moderated the conflict between politics and morality.<sup>622</sup> The tendency of power to be abused confronted every society with a “treble problem”: to decentralize power as much as possible, to bring power under social control, and to establish “inner moral checks” on the exercise of power.<sup>623</sup> This last was crucial. The “disciplining” of power was advanced, not just by institutional checks, but by a “sense of justice” – the “inclination to give each man his due” – and by a “sense of humility,” which protected against the tendency of a “too confident sense of justice” to lead to injustice. A spirit of humility and concern for justice – founded on a sense of “the mystery and greatness of the other,” and recognition of one's own limitations – was “of greater importance in our nation today than abstract constitutional schemes.”<sup>624</sup> Human sinfulness threatens to corrupt even the best institutional structures; individual moral effort has the power to partly redeem even the worst institutions.<sup>625</sup> While institutional arrangements of checks and balances were indispensable, there was also a need for an ethic that both accepted conflict and limitation, and sought to move, unsteadily and carefully, beyond them toward greater justice; and for prophetic exhortation to combat the tendency toward the corruption of institutions by individual and group egoism – and the corruption of individuals by institutions.

In the interwar period, Niebuhr had stressed the importance of institutional balancing of power rather than individual character or conscience. “Realism” had seemed to dictate that

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<sup>622</sup> Cf. Kenneth Thompson, “The Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr”, in Kegley op.cit., 234.

<sup>623</sup> “Optimism and Utopianism”, *The World Tomorrow* Feb 22, 1933, quoted Schlesinger 201.

<sup>624</sup> IAH 138-9.

<sup>625</sup> For example, slavery was essentially wrong: yet “it did make a difference to a slave whether he was subject to a kind or to a cruel master.” CRPP 169.

individual virtue could not be relied upon to hold up, or triumph, in politics. Now, Niebuhr came to believe that a realistic estimation of political experience showed that institutional arrangements in themselves were also not enough. His turn to a greater emphasis on personal character reflected his increased appreciation of the dangers that “hard utopianism” and fanaticism posed even within fairly stable democratic institutions. More positively, Niebuhr came to conclude that the “middle ground” (between Communism and Fascism) on which democracy rested was preserved “not so much by particular policies as by *discrimination in judgment* and by *integrity in observing basic standards of justice*”. Indeed, the fact that Nazism and Communism, “so different in ostensible policy yet so *similar in temper*” had produced such “identical fruits of cruelty and terror” was a sign that “the temper and the integrity with which the political fight is waged is more important for the health of a society than any particular policy, however necessary it is to fight for political policies which seem to us to embody the best hope of justice.” Not only Fascism and Communism, but the “psychosis” of McCarthyism, shared a “similarity in technique and temper” and “spirit”, marked by “indiscriminate accusation, the identification of any hated foe with any feared treason, the lack of meticulous standards of justice”.<sup>626</sup> McCarthyism, sharing as it did in the spirit and method of the totalitarian ideologies, threatened “the destruction of the spirit of democratic liberty in the name of devotion to it”.<sup>627</sup>

The main ethical pathology revealed by McCarthyism was that of Manicheanism – a tendency which posed a particularly dangerous threat to democracy. While McCarthy was a

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<sup>626</sup> “Beria and McCarthy”, 4 (*italics added*); “Love and Justice”, 299; IAH, 170; cf. “Democracy and the Party Spirit”, *The New Leader*, March 15, 1954, 3, 4.

<sup>627</sup> Contribution to “Our Country, Our Culture”, *Partisan Review* 19:3 (May-June 1952), 302-3.

mere a cynic, Manicheanism was a sin to which idealists were particularly prone. Idealists, seeking confirmation of their own virtue or superior moral insight and integrity, were apt to look for “the other person or nation” who is guilty, rather than acknowledging their own involvement in sin; they “add the fury of moral pride to the sin of selfishness,” forgetting that “political controversies are always conflicts between sinners and not between righteous men and sinners,” and that in “tragic” situations, where all alternatives are hazardous as well as tinged by sin, “equally sincere men will choose courses that will seem abhorrent one to the other.” This tendency, in addition to making them intolerant and irresponsible (insofar as they tended to assign responsibility for error to others), led idealists to a premature complacency about their own virtue – which hampered them in the pursuit of genuine improvement.<sup>628</sup>

Manicheanism was generally an obstacle to living a moral life well, for both societies and individuals. But it was particularly disruptive to parliamentary democracy, which was, in the words of Herbert Butterfield, a form of “limited war”; political conflict could not remain sufficiently limited unless there prevailed “a certain degree of mutual respect or at least tolerance” between opposed partisans. “Whenever the followers of one political party persuade themselves that the future of the nation is not safe with the opposition in power, it becomes fairly certain that the nation's future is not safe”. Democratic politics required a capacity for “discriminating judgment”, which recognized that “an opponent on one issue is not necessarily an opponent on every other issue.” At the same time, Niebuhr warned against the tendency to ally oneself with any potential partner, however reprehensible, in opposition to some supposedly ultimate evil. This folly – characteristic of collaborators with Nazism, Communist fellow-

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<sup>628</sup> *Love and Justice*, 292, 296; “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist”, 248; NDM I, 205.



travelers, and liberal anti-communists who made excuses for McCarthyism – actually reflected the same error in outlook as a purist refusal to work with any “strange bedfellows”: a view of the world as divided between ultimate good and ultimate evil, and of absolute, unqualified victory in certain struggles as a moral imperative.<sup>629</sup>

Niebuhr's heightened concern with the spirit and culture of democratic politics also reflected one respect in which his outlook really had become more “Burkean”: his increased appreciation of the moral claims of peace and stability, and of the need to balance these values against the pursuit of justice, combined with a greater awareness of the importance of tradition and a sense of community to social stability. Democratic polities, he warned, were faced with the challenge of finding a path between the dangers of dissolution and orthodoxy.<sup>630</sup> There was a need for some element of “organic” unity in a society. Yet Niebuhr continued to hold that no doctrine or set of institutions should be given unqualified devotion. A “too uncritical devotion” accentuates the vices of institutions, and “makes them incapable of adjusting themselves to new situations.” A degree of individual integrity – the ability to “defy social authority” when it violated the individual's conscience – was necessary to preserve democratic society against injustice.<sup>631</sup> Burkean sociology had to be balanced with prophetic moral criticism of traditions and current practices – and with a democratic impulse of skepticism and irreverence. The “ethos of a free society” encompassed suspicion and scrutiny of every public power, a challenging of every pretension to wisdom, and “a high degree of empiricism” which eschewed all “sweeping

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<sup>629</sup> “Democracy and the Party Spirit”, 3; “Beria and McCarthy”, 4.

<sup>630</sup> See Halliwell, 167-80.

<sup>631</sup> *Politics*, 191-2; IAH 125-6.

generalizations and assumptions ... A healthy democracy never gives all the power to the proponents of any one dogma; it holds all claims to truth under critical review”.<sup>632</sup> A critical spirit was needed to defend against the “demagogues” and “fools” who threatened to hijack democracy, and combat “technocratic illusions” with “the weapons of both scorn and laughter”. This critical spirit must be “rigorous and vital”, irreverent but not cynical.<sup>633</sup>

This emphasis on democracy's need for a critical and self-critical citizenry was linked to Niebuhr's defense of “realism” as a “disposition” – a matter of “temper and viewpoint” rather than doctrine.<sup>634</sup> Dispositional realism involves, first, a tendency to “take *everything* into account”,<sup>635</sup> to study the available evidence carefully, to strive to see *all* sides of a complex phenomenon, and to balance or integrate them in consideration, eschewing self-gratifying conceptions which proved untenable in the face of experience.<sup>636</sup> Second, dispositional realism is sensitive to the non-rational, “vital” elements of passion and will in human history. Against dispositional idealists' tendency to be blind or indifferent to forces in human life which offer resistance to “universally valid ideals and norms”, and to “take the moral pretensions of their fellowmen at face value”, a “realist” sensibility is attuned to the power of “conflicting egoistic wills” in human life.<sup>637</sup> Dispositional realism thus depended on an ethic or practice of

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<sup>632</sup> CRPP 50-51, 98-99; see also IAH 104.

<sup>633</sup> “Our Country, Our Culture”, 302-3; “The World I Would Like to Live In”, Niebuhr papers, box 17, 7, quoted Halliwell, 179.

<sup>634</sup> “The Relevance of Christian Realism”, Rasmussen, 121-2; cf CRPP 119-20, where Niebuhr remarks that “Realism” and “idealism” were “dispositions, rather than doctrines”.

<sup>635</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 128.

<sup>636</sup> Cf. Thompson in Kegley, *op. cit.*, 247-8.

<sup>637</sup> *Love and Justice*, 266; “The Relevance of Christian Realism”, Rasmussen, 121-2. See also CRPP, 119-20.

renouncing and disciplining the proclivity toward wishful thinking, and particularly the tendency to assume that success will follow as the reward for virtuous action.<sup>638</sup> It also required a pragmatic openness and responsiveness to “the uniqueness of each historical situation” – and freedom from the blinders of theory and interest.<sup>639</sup> This dispositional (as opposed to doctrinal) realism was qualified, as we have seen, by Niebuhr's adherence to a “prophetic” ethic, which both asserted the relevance of morality, and warned against self-righteousness by insisting that nothing in human life and history was wholly secure or morally pure – and that the quest for absolutes in fact heightened the insecurity and injustice of human life.<sup>640</sup>

Sustaining a liberal democracy which was responsive to the demands of both peace and justice – as well as the realities of human nature, and the challenges of unpredictable events – thus demanded a the cultivation of a political ethos that could combine “realism” and prophetic witness. This was a difficult combination – and balance – to effect. But the ethos that Niebuhr envisioned was not an idealization born of theory. It owed much to the example of extraordinary individuals, ranging from the historical figure of Abraham Lincoln, to the clergy and civic activists Niebuhr had encountered early in his career. Foremost among these was the Detroit lawyer Fred M. Butzel, “the most remarkable man I have ever encountered”. Butzel was a philanthropist who could analyze the workings of power with complete dispassion; he displayed

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<sup>638</sup> CRPP 163-4.

<sup>639</sup> Even pragmatism proved too simplistic for Niebuhr. Comparing two American presidents who led the country to war – Wilson and Roosevelt – Niebuhr noted the difference between Wilson's adherence to a lofty blueprint of the world he wished to realize, with Roosevelt's improvisatory approach. Niebuhr did not affirm the wisdom of Roosevelt against Wilson: Roosevelt's trust in improvisation threatened to breed chaos rather than order. What was needed in the conduct of world affairs was not virtuoso pragmatism, but a synthesis of pragmatism and idealism (see Naveh, 80-81).

<sup>640</sup> See e.g. IAH 34-5, 159; Bennett, 129.

a tough-minded, but not malicious, cynicism about the political process, combined with an unsentimental compassion and “an ethical creed in which charity and integrity were the prime components: the charity was at once so broad and so free of condescension” that he broadened Niebuhr's own moral horizons.<sup>641</sup>

Butzel was a model of how to appreciate humanity while recognizing its shortcomings; and of the wisdom and virtue that Niebuhr believed was contained in a sense of humor.<sup>642</sup> Humor was not just personally attractive; it was “indispensable” to those engaged in “organizing their fellowmen in common endeavors”, because it “reduces the frictions of life and makes the foibles of men tolerable”. Humor was wise, because there is “in the laughter with which we observe and greet the foibles of others, a nice mixture of mercy and judgment, of censure and forbearance.” People with a sense of humor “are able to 'stand off' from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions. All of us ought to be ready to laugh at ourselves because all of us are a little funny in our foibles, conceits and pretensions. What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously.” And the less we are able to laugh at ourselves, “the more it becomes necessary and inevitable that others laugh at us.” To meet the “disappointments and frustrations ... irrationalities and contingencies” of life with laughter is “a high form of wisdom”; while

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<sup>641</sup> Kenneth W. Thompson, “Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History”, in Nathan A. Scott, ed. *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr* (University of Chicago Press, 1975), 102; Fox, 92-3; Niebuhr, PSA 91.

<sup>642</sup> Despite the portentousness into which his writing often fell, Niebuhr's personal power drew on his wry, self-deprecating sense of humor. This humor was part of his accessibility, his capacity to challenge his students intellectually while making clear his love for them; it was also the means through which he was able to remind himself, and others, that he did not stand outside of, but was implicated in, much of what he criticized.. See Ronald Stone, “The Responsibility of the Saints”, *Christian Century* 90, September 12, 1973, 881; cf. Halliwell, 7; Richard Crouter, *Reinhold Niebuhr: On Politics, Religion, and Christian Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 59-76.

laughter at oneself is a “prelude to the sense of contrition”. But while laughter may express an ability to “stand back” from ourselves and a correct refusal to take ourselves too seriously, it may also reflect an “irresponsible” mood which takes neither the self nor life seriously enough. It protects against our pretenses, but cannot deal with the “ultimate” problems of evil and death. Humorlessness is dangerous, but humor in itself is not enough.<sup>643</sup>

Niebuhr would refine his qualified praise of humor in his account of irony. “Irony” for Niebuhr referred to situations and dynamics that arise in history: the “apparently fortuitous incongruities” which, on inspection, prove to have a hidden meaning, as when “virtue becomes vice through some hidden defect”, or strength becomes weakness through vanity, or “wisdom becomes folly because it does not know its own limits.”<sup>644</sup>

This phenomenon of historical irony could be discerned in the empirical study of history – although Niebuhr held that the ironic *pattern* of history could only be fully appreciated through a theological conception of history, as the unfolding of an unknown divine plan. Niebuhr's account of irony nevertheless provides lessons – and resources – for those who do not share Niebuhr's theological framework.<sup>645</sup> We may distinguish irony as a feature of situations from a *sense* of irony, which consists in *awareness* of such incongruities, and appreciation of the limits of human action. Cultivating a sense of irony usually requires a detachment impossible for participants (except for the “very self-critical”), and therefore more often characterizes observers than activists. Yet such perception of irony is often needed to escape from folly. There is thus a

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<sup>643</sup> “Humour and Faith”, *The Essential Niebuhr*, 51-7, 60.

<sup>644</sup> IAH xxiv, 154.

<sup>645</sup> I return to this point below.

need to combine engagement (which is demanded by a sense of responsibility) with an element of detachment – a demanding requirement.<sup>646</sup> Political participants – and, in a democracy, everyone is potentially a political participant – must be “both in the battle and above it”: they must be ready to “defend a cause against its peril, to protect a nation against its enemies, to strive for truth against error, to defend justice against injustice”, all while understanding “how imperfect the cause is which we defend”, acknowledging the sins of one's own nation or party, and recognizing “the common humanity” – and common need of “grace and forgiveness” – which “binds is to even the most terrible foes”.<sup>647</sup> Such a *standpoint* of irony (or, an ironic”interpretation of life”) allows one to at once ridicule human pretensions, sympathize with human aspirations, and sorrow at human failures. It also protects against myopia and complacency, by recognizing that there might always be a larger, more penetrating perspective beyond that available to us.<sup>648</sup>

Niebuhr thus echoed Weber's call for an ethos that combined distance (particularly a distanced perspective on oneself), judgment, and passion; he also echoed Weber's admiration for a sense of chivalry.<sup>649</sup> Where he departed from Weber was in his embrace of an attitude of humorous irony, which resisted the tendency to take oneself (or others) too seriously – a tendency which, as in Weber's case, could promote an extremism of sobriety, a tragic vision which could encourage a grim surrender to disaster and a tendency to see political leaders as

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<sup>646</sup> See IAH, 153, 170-2.

<sup>647</sup> “In the Battle and Above It”, *Christianity and Society* 7:4 (Autumn 1942), 3.

<sup>648</sup> IAH, 168. Cf. Naveh, 121, 186.

<sup>649</sup> On this point see Lester, “British Conservatism and American Liberalism in Mid-Twentieth Century”; on my reading Niebuhr was more sensitive to the dangers of paternalism inherent in a *noblesse oblige* attitude than Lester allows.

heroic martyrs to their responsibilities – or as criminals needing to be punished. Niebuhr's emphasis on the virtue of humor, and its connection to the appreciation and defense of a free society – his belief that, in reconciling themselves to a darker vision of human society, liberals should also lighten up – would be echoed by other proponents of a tempered, anti-absolutist, yet scrupulous liberalism, to similar effect.

A sense of humor and an ironic perspective were paths to the virtue and discipline of humility.<sup>650</sup> The “spirit of humility” – which rested on a recognition of “the partial and particular character of everyone's interest and the fragmentary character of every human virtue” – was necessary for both leaders and citizens in a democracy, the survival of which depends on maintaining a “spirit of tolerant cooperation between individuals and groups”. Humility was also a crucial corollary of the democratic virtue of skepticism: for recognition of the universal, ineradicable human tendencies toward sin revealed the need “to question the validity of any claim, *including our own*”.<sup>651</sup>

In championing an attitude of humility, Niebuhr resembled other post-war liberals. But he stressed something more: a *practice of contrition*, the cultivation of an actively “uneasy conscience” as an appropriate and necessary response to the “guilt” that “unrighteous men and nations” accrue, including the guilt of “doing so much evil while we tried to do good.”<sup>652</sup> The evils that nations do must be seen in context; but this must not inure us to them, or allow us to deceive ourselves into denying that the evils we do are, in fact, evil, even if they may have been

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<sup>650</sup> Here again, Niebuhr resembled other proponents of the liberal ethos discussed here, such as Berlin and Michnik.

<sup>651</sup> CLCD, 151-2; CRPP 103; “Reply”, in Kegley, op. cit. 443 (*italics added*).

<sup>652</sup> “Editorial Notes”, *Christianity and Crisis*, 6:5 (April 1, 1946), 2, quoted Naveh 114.

preferable to other evils. Niebuhr advocated not mere self-deprecating humility, but active self-criticism – and attempts to overcome the faults of the self, even while recognizing the self's insurmountable limitations. Without contrition, and grace, “all moral striving generates a stinking sweat of self-righteousness and an alternation of fanatic illusions and fretful disillusionments”.<sup>653</sup>

Niebuhr not only preached, but exemplified, active self-criticism.<sup>654</sup> Throughout his life he was quick to publicly criticize what he regarded as mistakes in his earlier positions.<sup>655</sup> The freedom with which he admitted, and indeed highlighted, his mistakes and changes was his way of giving living force to his declaration that “We must make our judgment from day to day”, recognizing that “political and moral judgments are provisional and tentative,” and that an “apoplectic rigidity” bred injustice and folly. To be dedicated to living a moral life meant striving constantly to “perceive and confront those deceits and disguises by which we deceive ourselves and our fellowmen.” This led Niebuhr to emphasize the value of “rigorous internal analysis” to detect the “alloy of egoism which corrupts all benevolence”; and to readily revise his own views in response to experience, rather than being constrained by adherence to doctrine.<sup>656</sup> Niebuhr did not, however, engage in the narcissism of self-castigation: his concern was with the extent and

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<sup>653</sup> *Reflections on the End of an Era* (Scribners, 1954), 296.

<sup>654</sup> Thus, Niebuhr broke off in his criticism of the “naivete” of the leading Christian pacifist E Stanley Jones, asking himself (and his audience) “But who am I to pass judgment on Stanley Jones? He’s one of the great Christian saints of our time.” (Robert McAfee Brown, “Reinhold Niebuhr: A Study in Humanity and Humility” in Scott, *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 1).

<sup>655</sup> See e. g. MNHC, 21-2.

<sup>656</sup> PSA 60; IAH 146; “Prayer”, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, 72; MMIS 60.



limitations of humanity's possibilities, not merely his own.<sup>657</sup> He spiced charity with irreverence toward others – particularly those who claimed authority.<sup>658</sup> The combination of self-criticism and irreverence was an important ingredient in the ethos of liberal democracy, which required both moderation and tolerance, and a vigilant guarding against the arrogance and encroachment of power.<sup>659</sup>

This picture of humble yet determinedly engaged and questioning citizens seems to undercut the worry that Niebuhr's stress on the sinfulness and irony of political life encourage anti-political withdrawal and resignation<sup>660</sup> – the very charge that Niebuhr himself leveled against Karl Barth's neo-Orthodoxy, and any other “religious idealism which absolves us of responsibility for finding the best possible means to the highest possible social end”.<sup>661</sup> Such puristic quietism ran counter to “the guiding principle” of Niebuhr's “mature life”: that of “religious responsibility to political affairs” – the responsibility to seek to realize moral ideals of justice in a necessarily imperfect world, even as we know we will fall short: “We are men not God and we have to act even though we know that we are and will be proved by subsequent history to be sinful men in action.”<sup>662</sup> While insisting on the need for self-searching and

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<sup>657</sup> Thompson in Scott, op. cit., 100.

<sup>658</sup> This included suspicion of theologians, professional prophets, and indeed the ministry itself (“The professional ministry is at best a necessary evil and our Quaker friends may not be wholly wrong in regarding it as an unnecessary evil.”), which was perhaps surprising in one who spent much of his life training ministers and theologians. (Fox, 110).

<sup>659</sup> Cf. George Kateb, “On the Moral Distinctiveness of Representative Democracy”, in idem., *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture*, 36-56.

<sup>660</sup> See e.g. Melvin Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy* Columbia University Press, 2009), 122-3.

<sup>661</sup> “Barthianism and the Kingdom”, *Christian Century* 48:28 (July 15, 1931), 924-5; MMIS 67-9 .

<sup>662</sup> MNHC 25; Niebuhr quoted Schlesinger, 199.

contrition, Niebuhr thus also warned against excessive self-castigation – which reflected unrealistic aspirations toward, or standards of, purity and perfection, and clouded the ability to distinguish between greater and lesser evils, and between the height of moral excellence, and more modest, but necessary, moral standards.

Acceptance of the responsibility to preserve “some relative decency and justice in society against the tyranny and injustice into which society may fall” pointed to the need for careful practical judgment. A “social ethic” demanded “not unprudential heedlessness but discriminate judgments” about competing interests, and prudent adjudication between conflicting rights. While moral evaluations “cannot be made with absolute precision”, correct moral judgment and navigation requires careful, fine-grained perception and evaluation, which are precluded by the blunt instruments of the absolutist.<sup>663</sup> Such capacity for “discriminate” judgment required, in turn, cultivating the intellectual virtue of realism, “empirical wisdom” (as opposed to “dogma”), and moral virtues of honesty and charity toward opponents.<sup>664</sup>

Niebuhr thus advocated, against a purism that fostered withdrawal or despair and an extremism which fostered folly, a “responsible attitude” – a “settled disposition to view situations in a certain way, and to choose and to act in ways appropriate to that view”. This view is one that expects human beings and situations to be complex, flawed, and not wholly knowable; it is suspicious of vaunting aspirations and simple solutions. But the disposition of responsibility avoids paralysis; it grapples with concrete choices of political action, which make “small differences in daily life – a little more or a little less justice, a little more or a little less

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<sup>663</sup> *Love and Justice*, 270; PSA, 93, 103, 118, 122; CRPP 163; IAH, 158.

<sup>664</sup> “Beria and McCarthy”, op.cit., 4.

freedom”.<sup>665</sup> A responsible attitude subjects choices to constant scrutiny, and is prepared to revise them. But it also accepts that choices must be made – and the consequences of those choices, which human power cannot completely control and human wisdom cannot confidently predict, must be grappled with as they come.

Niebuhr's conception of responsibility as one of the most essential political virtues – and his worries about the dangers of an attitude of irresponsibility – went back to the searing experience of World War I, which had led him to conclude that the sin of those who led their nations into war arose not from malice, but irresponsibility: they had behaved as children playing with dangerous toys.<sup>666</sup> But he also identified irresponsibility in many of those who had reacted to the war by embracing pacifism – and did not alter their stance in the face of new and different evils. Facing – and advocating participation in – another war, Niebuhr went so far as to declare the “evasion of responsibility” to be the essence of immorality.<sup>667</sup> This immorality was a temptation both to those who embraced power, but failed to live up to the moral demands possessing power over others imposes; and those who renounced power, and thus the capacity to resist evil.<sup>668</sup>

Niebuhr's “Christian realism” resembled the position of other post-war liberals in its affirmation of skepticism, humility, clear-eyed perception, and moderation. To this he added several specifically Christian elements, which set his position apart. First, he leavened realism with a stress on the validity and importance of *hope*, which could sustain the struggle for justice

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<sup>665</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 6-7, 95; see also Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 130.

<sup>666</sup> *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 43.

<sup>667</sup> Niebuhr, “Is Neutrality Immoral?”, *The Christian Century* 11 November 1941 1399-1400.

<sup>668</sup> See e.g. CLCD, 51.

in the face of inevitable adversity – but without an unrealistic certainty of success. Second, he advocated an ethic of *love* understood not as the ideal, super-human, heedless self-giving exemplified by Jesus, but as a dedication to accepting responsibilities toward others – and cultivating the virtues of imaginative insight into and concern for the lives of others, and forgiveness of others' inevitable shortcomings. As motive and orientation, love inspired a focus on concrete human needs, which should take priority over theoretical constructs, or dreams which are more productive of comfort for the dreamer than succor for the suffering. Finally, Christian realism was buoyed by a spirit of gratitude, which protected against self-congratulation by accepting good fortune as “mercies” rather than a sign of virtue.<sup>669</sup>

Maintaining the combination and balance of these elements, while steering between “hope” and “disillusionment”,<sup>670</sup> required a “heroic courage”, one that could sustain a modulated pessimism, which recognized that human virtue will always be fragmentary, human achievements tentative and fragile, and human happiness incomplete. To avoid defeatism and abdication, it was necessary to have a “measure of historic hope”, a belief that success was not impossible. But it was also necessary to have a courage that transcended hope. Niebuhr – again echoing Weber, and rejecting the millenarian faith of Marxism as well as the meliorist assumptions of progressivism – praised “those heroes who resisted evil at the risk or price of fortune and life without too much hope of success. Sometimes their very indifference to the issue of success or failure provided the stamina which made success possible.” Such heroism required not only courage, but “patience” and a fortitude that made it possible to withstand

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<sup>669</sup> MMIS 255; CRPP 13, 166, 168; *Love and Justice* 242. See also IAH, 50, 54; and cf. Stone, *Prophet*, 234-5.

<sup>670</sup> The theme of steering between disillusionment and hope runs from Niebuhr's dissertation as a student at Yale Divinity School (1914), throughout his career (see Halliwell, 41).

disappointment and anxiety, and “sustain endeavors without complete certainty of success.”<sup>671</sup>

All of this may seem to add up to an assembly of attractive but incoherent bromides, suspended in unresolved tension. There is some truth to this impression; but this feature of Niebuhr's work is not necessarily a fault. Niebuhr was, like other chastened liberals in the post-war period, suspicious of the project of systematic theory, which he charged obscured the complex, conflicting qualities of human life, with its cross-purposes, inconsistencies, and “lacunae”. Niebuhr went so far as to declare that he “abhor[red] consistency as a matter of general principle”. Attempts to unify experience into a “system of rational coherence” ultimately led to “absurdity”, because they are “untrue to the facts of existence”. “This world will always contain contradictions for us ... we will never be able to construct an absolutely 'rounded off' universe without leaving out some of the actual realities. We must therefore abide by some of the contradictions to attain to reality.” Fidelity to the messiness of experience was a better guide to living than the attainment of a contrived coherence: “We preserve our sanity more surely if we do not try to reduce the whole crazy-quilt of events in which we move to a premature and illusory order.”<sup>672</sup> Indeed, “too-strict identification of goodness with coherence” threatens to lead to a condemnation of existence, since existence is marked by conflict: “The only complete harmony in life is in death, whether for individuals or groups”. Acceptance of contradiction and incompleteness was also politically beneficial: the health of modern society, which was marked by a diversity of often-opposed ideas and interests, depended on the debates and conflicts

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<sup>671</sup> *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work*, 40, 42, 47, 59; PSA 13; IAH, 144-5. On Niebuhr (and Schlesinger's) stress on the importance of a disposition of patience for political leaders, see Lester op.cit.

<sup>672</sup> Quotes from, *inter alia*, *Love and Justice*, 248; *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, 222; *Beyond Tragedy*, 210; “Humour and Faith”, 57; “The Validity and Certainty of Religious Knowledge” (1914), Niebuhr Papers, box 24, 21, quoted Halliwell, 36. See also NDM I, 14, 125-31; CRPP 102, 176-7; *The Self and the Dramas of History*, 24-5.

between these opposed positions remaining “inconclusive”.<sup>673</sup>

Like his friend Isaiah Berlin, Niebuhr articulated a tragic pluralism, according to which “no single overarching norm” could provide a basis for “judging all other norms”, and there are “situations in which a choice must be made between equally valid loyalties and one value must be sacrificed to another”; and “rational resolutions of such tragic dilemmas which pretend that a higher loyalty is necessarily inclusive of a lower one, or that a prudent compromise between competing values can always be found, are false.” There is an “element of truth in each position” in most debates; but this element of truth “becomes falsehood ... when it is carried through too consistently”.<sup>674</sup>

Accordingly, Niebuhr sought to state truths about human experience and reality in a way that did justice to (seemingly) contradictory aspects contained within this reality. He strove for bifocality – to widen and complicate his own and his readers' range of vision, and to recognize both the fixity and mutability in experience, in their complex interaction.<sup>675</sup> In pursuit of such bifocality, he adopted an approach to thinking and writing that was “dialectical”: starting by identifying inadequate and mistaken views, coming to understand what inspired them and where they went wrong, and moving beyond them. But insofar as the notion of dialectic suggests the possibility of a final resolution, it may be better to characterize Niebuhr's thought as “dialogic”. This is in keeping with Niebuhr's own account of the self as developing through a set of ongoing

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<sup>673</sup> CRPP 184; “The Jew and the World”, *The Nation*, July 4, 1936, 27; “Democracy and the Party Spirit”, op.cit., 4.

<sup>674</sup> IAH, 107, 157; Thompson, “The Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr”, 248-9. Niebuhr's pluralism was qualified by his religious faith, which allowed him to postulate both a harmony of values, and the superiority of Christ-like love to other moral values and attainments – while denying that this divine love was normative for the world. On other differences between Berlin and Niebuhr see Cherniss, *A Mind and its Time*, 70, 72.

<sup>675</sup> Cf. Halliwell 59.

dialogs with itself and with others; and his picture of moral judgment as involving a “perpetual internal dialog”.<sup>676</sup> Niebuhr drew on both introspection and conversation with others – particularly those who saw things differently – as antidotes to stagnation and thoughtlessness or one-sidedness: the “scrutiny” of “thoughtful” others was the best way to discern the “limitations” and errors of one's own perspective.<sup>677</sup> Such dialog would often be conflictual, and yield no consensus or final certainty; but it was important to remain open to it.

Niebuhr's rejection of systematic coherence, and embrace of a continuous dialog, had implications for the content, as well as the manner, of his political thought. The fact that any discipline, philosophical or scientific, was unable to “do justice to the tang and flavor of individual uniqueness” – or to respect the dignity that inheres in individuals on account of their uniqueness and self-creative freedom – was reason to be wary of rule by “philosopher kings” and technocratic experts.<sup>678</sup> More positively, awareness of the limits of theory and the unpredictability of events could improve political judgment. Rigid consistency could be self-undermining; a more supple approach was necessary to keep myriad complex commitments in view. A combination or balance of opposed insights might be beyond attainment by any individual. And so it was important to remain humbly open to the voices of others, and resolutely committed to an ongoing, self-correcting dialog. It was also important to recognize that it was the “wisdom of democracy” to guard against dangerous consistency – and thus, to affirm those institutional safeguards provided by democracy that made dialog possible.<sup>679</sup> But it required not

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<sup>676</sup> IAH, 83. On this point see also *The Self and the Dramas of History*, passim.

<sup>677</sup> Halliwell, 10-11, 91 (quoting from *Leaves* 76).

<sup>678</sup> IAH, 8-9; see also *ibid.*, 22, 58-9, 72, 80-85, 100, 106-8, for Niebuhr's attacks on technocracy.

<sup>679</sup> IAH, 107. Cf. William John Wolf, “Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man”, Kegley, 307-8.

just institutions, but a dialogic ethos, to ensure that the confrontation of conflicting perspectives in public life yielded a dialog, rather than a shouting-match among the deaf.

### **F. Conclusion**

Niebuhr's contribution to post-war liberalism was considerable. But the appropriation of his thought for liberal theory has always been problematic. This is partly because his position was so protean in content, and expressed with greater regard for rhetorical resonance than theoretical precision. It is also partly because his thought rested on a theological foundation which many of Niebuhr's admirers did not share (or, one suspects, fully understand). As the philosopher Morton White suggested, there was something incongruous about the post-war proliferation of “atheists for Niebuhr”. Niebuhr's religious commitments and the theological sub-structure of his thought provided, in his own eyes, the underlying unity which kept the various elements of his position from flying off in opposite directions – and which justified the affirmation of hope and moral obligation in the face of his “realism”. Eschewing appeal to this theological foundation meant that Niebuhr's fellow “realist”, “anti-utopian” liberals had to find other bases for their commitment to a liberal morality in the face of the amorality of power politics, and to an ethic of responsibility in the face of an absolutist ideal of purity.<sup>680</sup> As we shall see, these alternative, secular bases for tempered liberalism often shared much in common with the substance of Niebuhr's ethics, despite their eschewal of his theology.

While secular liberals may not easily adopt central features of Niebuhr's position, his

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<sup>680</sup> It should be stressed that while Niebuhr regarded the theological elements of his thought as crucial to its coherence, he was also quite ready to make common cause with – and both draw on, and praise, the wisdom of – others whose political, ethical, and psychological perceptions coincided with his own, despite their lack of religious faith; in doing so, he cited religious justification – “By their fruits shall ye know them”.



account of moral psychology and social ethics – by drawing on the ethical ideals, as opposed to the theological doctrines, of Christianity – adds important elements to the conception of a liberal political ethos that more purely secular liberals neglected or subordinated. Niebuhr went beyond most of his fellow-liberals in giving voice not only to the need for humility and ideological circumspection, but for acceptance of a radical human finitude and fallibility – and a balancing of this acceptance with a hope which was neither naïve and implausible, nor rationally defensible. As he famously wrote:

“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.”<sup>681</sup>

This insistence on the imperative of striving, the inevitability of error and failure, and the need for forgiveness all informed his articulation of an ethic of contrition, which may constitute the most distinctive strand in Niebuhr's contribution to the ethics and ethos of anti-extremist liberalism. The practice of contrition – active, searching self-criticism which aimed at moral improvement and growth, even as it accepted the difficulty of such achievements – combined with Niebuhr's insistence on social responsibility, prophetic commitment to justice, and hope, offer a protection against the potential of humility and skepticism to promote complacency, defeatism, or pusillanimity; and of unsentimental “realism” to foster cynicism, or a romanticism of dirty hands.<sup>682</sup>

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<sup>681</sup> IAH, 68.

<sup>682</sup> On the latter point, cf. Michael Walzer's discussion of Weber in “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands”, *Thinking Politically*, 290-92.

The primary significance of Niebuhr's *Christian* realism for his political thought was thus, I suggest, not his furnishing of a (putatively) firmer foundation or justification of liberalism in Christian doctrine, but the enrichment and complication of a liberal political ethos with elements of contrition, hope, and forgiveness, which could both sustain, and soften, the skepticism, sobriety, and fortitude counseled by other “chastened liberals.” At the same time, his retention of a “prophetic” assertion of moral ideals and skepticism toward worldly power allowed him to maintain a sharp critical edge within his political outlook. Niebuhr was thus able to steer between the despairing embrace of radicalism that tempted figures such as Weber, and the tendency toward complacency or capitulation that tempted figures such as Berlin.<sup>683</sup>

Running through the stages of Niebuhr's political pilgrimage is a persistent impulse of ethical aversion to pride, particularly when it takes the forms of furious self-righteousness and smug self-satisfaction. Niebuhr's migration toward a sort of liberalism was motivated, in part, by a recognition that furious self-righteousness was as, and often more, dangerous than smug self-satisfaction – and by the recognition that the latter, as well as the former, often marked adherents of radical politics. But he did not forget the dangers of smugness – or the capacity of liberals and conservatives for both self-satisfied smugness, and self-righteous fury. Niebuhr's early “radical” and later “liberal” thought alike sought to balance the imperatives of a hard-headed “realism”, and a “prophetic” criticism of existing social arrangements from a moral perspective. These elements gave Niebuhr's work a persistently critical edge, which he often deployed against his own side (be it socialism, liberalism, or Christianity). Niebuhr's thought and practice reveal the

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<sup>683</sup> Here, too, Niebuhr's religious faith contributed to his position, allowing for a hope that saved him from despair, and a perspective on the earthly world that saved him from excessive attachment to particular orders.

power of a liberal ethos marked by both searching realism and ethical integrity to remain at once sober and critically reformist in the face of the competing temptations of purism, sentimentality, resignation, and power. They also offer a warning against liberal complacency (including complacency by “realist” liberals). For all his influence on and embrace by political leaders and cultural elites, Niebuhr chafed at the role of court theologian of liberalism, in which critics and admirers alike cast him. This refusal to become a comfortable standard-bearer for liberalism may constitute Niebuhr's greatest contribution to liberalism's cause.

## Chapter 5. “The Courage of ... Our Doubts and Uncertainties”<sup>684</sup>: Isaiah Berlin on the Ethics of Moderation and the Ethos of Liberalism

*“The imagination lives by its contradictions and disdains any form of oppression, including the oppression of the mind by a single idea.”*<sup>685</sup>

Isaiah Berlin is among the best-known liberal thinkers of the twentieth century, familiar to political theorists for his account of “positive” and “negative” liberty, and his linkage of liberalism to a pluralistic account of ethics. Less noted are the ways in which Berlin's contribution to liberal theory reflects the main features of the ethically-centered, “tempered” liberalism discussed here. Berlin was, above all, preoccupied with questions of *ethics* – “what men and women should be and do”.<sup>686</sup> His political thought, accordingly, revolved around major themes of this study: the question of the relationship between means and ends,<sup>687</sup> and between the demands of political responsibility and personal morality; the lure of extremism, fanaticism, and ruthlessness; the nature, claims, and dangers of “realistic” and “idealistic” attitudes to politics; and the value and limits of an ethos of moderation. Berlin articulated the values and anxieties, embodied the temper, and lived through the tensions of the apprehensive, ethically-oriented liberalism with which this study is concerned.

Berlin's work also presents an especially rich resource for considering the role of ethos in political thought and action. Both his account of political judgment, and his portraits of earlier

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<sup>684</sup> Berlin, “Tolstoy and Enlightenment”, *Russian Thinkers* ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Penguin, 2008), 296. All citations in this chapter are to works by Berlin unless otherwise noted.

<sup>685</sup> Stanley Kunitz, *Passing Through* (Norton, 1995), 11.

<sup>686</sup> “The Pursuit of the Ideal”, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* [CTH] ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton University Press, 1998), 2; cf. “European Unity and its Vicissitudes”, *ibid.*, 180-1.

<sup>687</sup> As Berlin remarked, “The dilemma of means and ends is the deepest and most agonising problem that torments the revolutionary movements of our day [1960]” (“Russian Populism”, *Russian Thinkers* 254.)

thinkers, are informed by an appreciation of the importance of “pattern qualities” of character – individuals’ “habits of thought and emotion, ways of looking at, reacting to, talking about experiences”; and by an almost novelistic sensitivity to the interplay of beliefs with different individuals’ “style of life” and “cast of mind or heart”.<sup>688</sup> Berlin’s writings convey, as those of few philosophers do, not only the doctrinal roots of philosophical and ideological tendencies, but the interaction of these beliefs with common psychological dynamics, the quirks of individual personality, and the influence of environment, tradition, and events.<sup>689</sup> His writings also vividly communicate Berlin’s own distinctive temperament and vision. In both respects, Berlin contributes to an appreciation of the importance of ethos to an understanding of the ethics of political life, and to the reconstruction of liberalism in opposition to anti-liberalism.<sup>690</sup>

At the same time, his pluralism, and temperamental ambivalence and resistance to finality, allowed him to appreciate conflicting elements within the commitments, demands, and dispositions enjoined by a tempered liberalism. For Berlin, the articulation and cultivation of a liberal ethos represented a way of responding to the reality of pluralism. At the same time, the

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<sup>688</sup> “The Sense of Reality”, *The Sense of Reality* [SR] ed. Henry Hardy (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 23.

<sup>689</sup> Cf Jonathan Allen, “The Place of Negative Morality in Political Theory”, *Political Theory* 29:3 (June 2001), 362n.36: “One of the many virtues of Isaiah Berlin’s essays in the history of ideas is that they convey a sense of the complex interaction between moral and political doctrines and the psychological dispositions of those who held or articulated them.”

<sup>690</sup> The significance of Berlin’s work as presenting a liberal *Weltanschauung* – and modeling a liberal temperament and capacities of empathic perception – has been noted by a number of interpreters, though it has seldom been given sufficient prominence in considering the content and contribution of his thought. Among works that do assign it such prominence, see e.g. Alan Ryan, “Isaiah Berlin: Political Theory and Liberal Culture”, *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999), 345-62; Alex Zakaras, “A Liberal Pluralism: Isaiah Berlin and John Stuart Mill”, *Review of Politics*, 75:1 (Winter 2013), 69-96. The linked, but distinct, focus of Berlin’s thought on giving an account and applying a model of practical judgment has been discussed by Ryan Patrick Hanley, “Political Science and Political Understanding: Isaiah Berlin on the Nature of Political Inquiry”, *American Political Science Review*, 98 (2004), 327–39; and Ella Myers, “From Pluralism to Liberalism: Rereading Isaiah Berlin”, *Review of Politics*, 72:4 (Fall 2010), 599-625.

conflicts between different ideals of character and ethical goals recognized by pluralism pointed to difficulties which the ethos Berlin articulated was able to recognize and grapple with, but which it could not overcome.

#### **A. Political Ethics and the “Liberal Predicament”**

Berlin’s Oxford contemporary Iris Murdoch once remarked that “It is always a significant question to ask of any philosopher: what is he afraid of?”<sup>691</sup> It is unlikely that Berlin would have gravitated toward political theory had it not been for the apprehension and revulsion provoked in him by the political developments of his day. While there was more to Berlin’s thought than fear, it is with his experiences and his fears that his political thought began.

Foremost among these was the compound of intoxication with doctrine and political violence – the “torture of innocent men” by “monomaniacs in pursuit of the millenium”.<sup>692</sup> Berlin was confronted with this phenomenon early on. As a child in Petrograd he observed the euphoria of the Revolution’s early days – the restless migration from meeting to meeting, the excited reports of speeches and recaps of the latest events. He also witnessed the turmoil of an urban revolution – and early signs of what was to come: Bolsheviks (then known as “Maximalists”) tearing down the electoral lists of other parties, replacing them with posters of the hammer and sickle. Walking down the street with his nurse, the eight-year-old Berlin saw a Tsarist policeman being dragged off by a mob, to probable lynching. The incident occurred during the early, liberal phase of the Revolution, and the victim was a member of a brutal agency

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<sup>691</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (Routledge, 1985), 72.

<sup>692</sup> “Political Judgement”, SR 50. Here and elsewhere (see e.g. “Introduction”, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy [Oxford University Press, 2002], 14, 52), Berlin objects, particularly, to the torture or suffering of the *innocent*; although liberals and humanists like Berlin should surely object to torture *as such*.

of autocratic oppression. But while he could reflectively recognize in the incident a manifestation of an enslaved people seizing liberty from their rulers, Berlin was left with the image of “a pale faced man being dragged off to his death ... by a savage crowd, screaming.”<sup>693</sup> For the rest of his life, Berlin's attraction to political ideals would be constrained by the reality of political violence and human suffering; his own political vision was guided by “hatred of the human pack in full cry against a victim”, and a corresponding “desire to protect dissidents and heretics as such”.<sup>694</sup>

Within a year of arriving in England, the twelve-year-old Berlin wrote a melodramatic tale of revenge in post-Revolutionary Russia, inspired by the assassination of M. S. Uritsky, the sometime head of the Petrograd Cheka. In the fictionalized Uritsky we have Berlin's first portrait of the fanatical mind: “He signed death verdicts without moving his eyebrow. His leading motto in life was 'The purpose justifies the ways.' He did not stop before anything for bringing out his plans”. Uritsky “divided manhood into two classes”: those who stood in his way, and those who obeyed him; the former, “according to Uritsky's understanding, did not deserve to live at all.”<sup>695</sup>

This early portrait anticipates Berlin's mature preoccupation with fanaticism, dehumanization, and ruthlessness. It also reflects the importance of Russian sources in forming Berlin's political-ethical imagination.<sup>696</sup> Berlin's defense of a conventionally “British” ethos of

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<sup>693</sup> Interview with Michael Ignatieff, 20 October 1988, transcribed by Esther Johnson, in Isaiah Berlin archive, Wolfson College, Oxford; Berlin, “In Conversation with Steven Lukes”, *Salmagundi*, 120 (Fall 1998), 57, 60-61.

<sup>694</sup> “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life”, in *Liberty* 238-9.

<sup>695</sup> “The Purpose Justifies the Ways”, *Liberty*, 334.

<sup>696</sup> Berlin himself noted that “when I really have something that I want to say it can only occur in the Russian context.” (to Anna Kallin, 17 Nov 1970, in Berlin, *Building: Letters 1960-1975*, ed. Henry Hardy and Mark Pottle [London, 2013], 437).

moderation and tolerance derived its peculiar tonality and urgency from the very different conditions of Russian political life; his beliefs, he wrote, “really spring from the heart of the Russian *intelligentsia*”.<sup>697</sup> Berlin was inspired by the *intelligentsia's* moral passion – even as his recognition of the disastrous consequences of many members of the *intelligentsia's* craving for intellectual and moral certainty and social transformation inoculated him against similar cravings.<sup>698</sup>

Berlin's perspective also reflected the experiences of the generation of politically aware intellectuals who came of age in the 1930s: the catastrophic failure of capitalism and seeming collapse of liberal democracy across much of the world; the complacency, callousness, or dithering of Britain's rulers; and the rejection by many, on both the right and the left, of “humanistic values as such”, the worship of brute strength, and the belief that “the conquest and retention of political power” required total dedication and self-abnegation to “some ruthless ideology, or the practice of despotism”.<sup>699</sup> This dark time left Berlin with a lasting sense of both the value and vulnerability of liberal democracy; the moral purchase of Communism on liberal and humanitarian sentiment in this period, and many liberal politicians' apparent ineffectuality, made him sensitive to indictments of liberalism as morally compromised and politically

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<sup>697</sup> To Nicolas Nabokov, 25 June 1970, *Building* 426.

<sup>698</sup> See e.g. Berlin's account of the intelligentsia in “A Sense of Impending Doom”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 July 2001, 11–12 [originally written c. 1935] For a fuller explication and contextualization of Berlin's debt to the Russian intelligentsia, see Andrzej Walicki, “Berlin and the Russian Intelligentsia”, *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin*, ed. George Crowder and Henry Hardy (Amherst, NY, 2007), 47–71; Gary M. Hamburg, “Closed Societies, Open Minds: Andrzej Walicki, Isaiah Berlin and the Writing of Russian History During the Cold War”, *Dialogue and Universalism*, 16:1–2 (2006), 7–72; Cherniss, *A Mind and its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford, 2013), 30–39.

<sup>699</sup> “European Unity and its Vicissitudes”, CTH 206; “President Franklin Delano Roosevelt”, *Personal Impressions*, ed. Henry Hardy (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Princeton, 1998), 25.



impotent.<sup>700</sup>

If the 1930s were formative, so was World War II. As a British diplomat in America Berlin was privy to the inner-workings of foreign diplomacy, and American domestic politics; exposure to the highest levels of government fostered appreciation of the murkiness and ironies of politics – what we might call the *politically realist* pole in Berlin's political sensibility. Later, confrontation with the political evil of totalitarianism (during a brief but formative diplomatic posting to Moscow) left Berlin with a perspective of *moral realism* about politics, according to which (some) political conflicts reflected alternatives of right and wrong, good and evil. These experiences also fostered a tendency to view politics from the perspectives of both political officials preoccupied with momentous decisions affecting the lives of their subjects; and artists and intellectuals grappling with the claims of political movements and ideologies. The tension between these perspectives – the one shaped by awareness of political responsibility and the moral compromises it involved, the other committed to the preservation of personal integrity – would run through Berlin's political thought.

His brush with post-war Soviet life left Berlin with a sharp perception of political terror, which aimed to crush the inner lives of those under its shadow, and to leech away their sense of dignity and personal integrity, by subjecting them to the constant, psychologically pulverizing force of fear.<sup>701</sup> This penetration of the victim's last lines of defense was the worst of political

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<sup>700</sup> Berlin later wrote of “the conversions of idealistic young liberals and radicals to Communism, or strong sympathy with it, often for no better reason than that it seemed the only force firm enough and strong enough to resist the Fascist enemy effectively” (“President Franklin Delano Roosevelt”, 25). For testimony from Berlin's own circle, see e.g. Stephen Spender, *Forward from Liberalism* (London, 1937); idem., contribution to *The God That Failed* (London, 1949) Jenifer Hart, *Ask Me No More* (London, 1998); see also Neal Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals* (New York, 1959).

<sup>701</sup> While Berlin did not make the evils of fear as theoretically central to his defense of liberalism as his fellow Riga-born Jewish refugee Judith Shklar, his writings contain a vivid evocation of the *experience* of fear under

evils;<sup>702</sup> among the worst of political vices was the “denial of common humanity”, the division of mankind into “men proper, and some other, lower, order of beings, inferior races, inferior cultures, subhuman species, nations or classes condemned by history,” which allowed men “to look on many millions of their fellow men as not quite human, to slaughter them without a qualm of conscience, without the need to try to save them or warn them.”<sup>703</sup> Berlin was sensitive to the particular horror of such calm, and indeed self-congratulatory, *ruthlessness* – the lack of any sense of qualm or guilt – on the part of sincere, benevolent ideologues. Such sanguine self-righteousness – the “deep, serene, unshakeable conviction in the minds of some of the most merciless tyrants and persecutors in history that what they did was fully justified by its purpose” – was enabled not only by dehumanization, but also by the confident conviction that one knew the truth, and was acting for the best.<sup>704</sup>

Firmly opposed to fanaticism and extremism, Berlin was also acutely aware of “the liberal predicament”: the position of liberals caught between opposing extremists on the right and the left, and between conflicting moral considerations and inclinations. Liberals admired the “selfless dedication” and “purity” of those who “offered their lives for the violent overthrow of the *status quo*” – while fearing that the price of “terrorist or Jacobin methods might be irreparable, and greater than any possible gains”. But they also questioned the validity of their

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autocracy. See e.g. “Russia and 1848”, *Russian Thinkers*, 15, 17, 20; “Soviet Russian Culture”, *The Soviet Mind*, ed. Henry Hardy (Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 148-150.

<sup>702</sup> See letter to George Kennan, 13 February 1951, *Liberty* 339.

<sup>703</sup> “European Unity and its Vicissitudes”, CTH 179–80.

<sup>704</sup> “Two Concepts of Liberty”, 214; cf. “The Pursuit of the Ideal”, 15-16. Elsewhere, Berlin (through Mill) suggested that the powerful human proclivity toward dominating others arose from one or a combination of the following motivations: a mere taste for imposing power on others; a desire for conformity and aversion to difference; and the belief that there is one and only one truth about how to live (“John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life”, 230).

own position: “they doubted, they wondered, they felt tempted, from time to time, to ... find peace by conversion to a revolutionary faith, above all by submission to the domination of the zealots”, to “stretch themselves upon a comfortable bed of dogma,” which would “save them from being plagued by their own uncertainties”. Berlin understood the attractions of such submission, but urged his fellow-liberals against it. He also warned them against the lure of embracing a liberal fundamentalism of their own. Liberals, being inclined to “see more than one side of a case”, and occupy a middle position that “depends on qualifications, and qualifications of qualifications, and gives no satisfaction to passionate adherents of any point of view”, had to renounce the comforts of certainty if they were to be true to their own insights.<sup>705</sup>

The liberal predicament, caught between hatred of existing injustice and oppression, and fear of radicals' proclivity for fanaticism and ruthlessness, represented one of the two prevailing ambivalences that structured Berlin's thinking about political ethics. The second was a response to the conflicting claims of “realism” and “idealism” as personal dispositions, and political responsibility and personal decency as ethical ideals. Both of these seemingly opposed tendencies exerted a pull on Berlin. At the same time, he saw both as reflecting a futile, and dangerous, longing for certainty, simplicity, security, and order, born of the experience of disappointment or disgust with the world as it is, and the frustration of attempts to improve it.<sup>706</sup>

Berlin is often viewed<sup>707</sup> as a critic of the intertwined tendencies of “utopianism” – the

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<sup>705</sup> “Fathers and Children”, 344; Berlin to Jacob Talmon, 21 November 1972; to Robert Joyce, 16 April 1973; to Aubrey Morgan, 4 February 1974 (*Building* 514, 531. 560).

<sup>706</sup> “Fathers and Children”, 304.

<sup>707</sup> See e.g. Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (Columbia University Press, 2005); Michael Walzer, “Ought We to Reclaim Political Utopia?”, *European Journal of Political Theory*; 12:1 (January 2013), 24-30; Zakaras, “A Liberal Pluralism”, 73-4.

longing for (and the tendency to measure reality against) a perfect, harmonious society;<sup>708</sup> ethical monism;<sup>709</sup> and “uncritical idealism”, or infatuation with abstract ideas. These tendencies, he alleged, fostered a “fanaticism of ideas”, which blinded its adherents to human realities, and went “hand in hand with lack of respect for persons”.<sup>710</sup> Berlin often lumped these tendencies together; we may refine his account by making some finer terminological distinctions. First, we may distinguish “monism” and “maximalism”. Monism promotes a tendency to neglect, devalue, or reject all but some single value or goal; maximalism ordains the rejection of any condition short of perfection. Monistic and maximalist outlooks are connected to the sensibilities of fanaticism and extremism. “Fanaticism” identifies a particular way of thinking about values and goals. The fanatic sees and judges everything “in the light of a single goal”, which is taken to be all-embracing and all-important. Fanaticism is passionate, domineering monomania. “Extremism” refers to a particular way of thinking about how to *pursue* one’s goals. The extremist sees issues in terms of all-or-nothing, and rejects compromise and half-measures, as so

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<sup>708</sup> See e.g. “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will”, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. Henry Hardy (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 336; “The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West”, CTH 20, 23.

<sup>709</sup> Berlin often presents monism in terms of a set of propositions about morality. But monism is more plausibly understood as an *outlook*, composed of several distinct assumptions, the connections between which are as much psychological as logical. In addition to assuming that “there is one truth and one only”, it holds that 1) one’s *whole life* should be devoted to the service of this truth; 2) there is “one method, and one only, for arriving at” this truth; and that there exists “one body of experts alone qualified to discover and interpret it”; and 3) whatever agent possesses the one ultimate truth has “a right to invade everything”: the “very notion of the inviolability of persons, or of areas of life” – the heart of liberalism – is “nothing but an effort to limit, to narrow, to conceal, to shut out the light, to preserve privilege, to protect some portion of ourselves from the universal truth”; the innermost recesses of the self must be open to “penetration” and direction by the single, ultimate truth. Monism thus justifies at the theoretical level what terror effects practically: a breach of those boundaries protecting the integrity of the self against domination by larger forces (“Soviet Russian Culture”, *The Soviet Mind* 134). For a different, and helpful, taxonomy of ethical monism see Jonathan Allen, “What’s the Matter with Monism”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 12:3 (2009), 469-89.

<sup>710</sup> “Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty” [HBIL], *Russian Thinkers* 89.

much “liberal fiddling, escape from the radical task”.<sup>711</sup>

Berlin saw dispositions to fanaticism and extremism at work not only in utopianism, but in its apparent opposite: “realism”. Here it is important to distinguish between three senses of “realism” in Berlin's work: 1) a proclivity to perceive reality accurately; 2) an ethical approach that holds that “What ought to be done must be defined in terms of what is practicable, not imaginary”;<sup>712</sup> and 3) a “more sinister” sense, meaning a tendency to be “harsh and brutal, not shrinking from what is usually considered immoral, not swayed by soft sentimental moral considerations”.<sup>713</sup> Berlin perceived this last sort of “realism” as a dangerously powerful force in post-war political thought: “there never was a time when more homage was paid to bullies as such: and the weaker the victim the louder (and sincerer) his paeans— *vide* E.H. Carr, Koestler, Burnham, Laski.”<sup>714</sup> Of these, Berlin was most concerned with Carr, who typified a contemporary “tendency to make fun, sometimes very brutal fun, of both idealism and sentimentality, and to oppose to this an ironical and somewhat contemptuous realism”.<sup>715</sup> Behind his “cool judgement and scrupulous scholarship”, Berlin charged, Carr was “deeply under the spell of those who understand the nature of power and know how to fight for it and how to use it when they have won it”. Carr correspondingly dismissed the losers and victims of history as

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<sup>711</sup> “Fathers and Children”, 312-14; see also “Equality”, *Concepts and Categories*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton University Press, 2013 [1978]), 91-3; *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton University Press, 2006), 104-5, 112-16, 127, 129-35; *Freedom and its Betrayal*, ed. Henry Hardy (Chatto and Windus, 2002), 33-9, 43.

<sup>712</sup> “The Originality of Machiavelli”, *Against the Current*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton University Press, 2001 [1979]), 46, 50; see also *ibid.*, 49.

<sup>713</sup> “Realism in Politics”, *The Power of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton University Press, 2000), 134; *Freedom and its Betrayal*, 96.

<sup>714</sup> Letter to Kennan, 343-4.

<sup>715</sup> Berlin to R. F. Kahn, 12 December 1952, Berlin Papers, 131/208-11.

“feeble flotsam adequately taken care of by history”. For Carr, “[o]nly the victors deserve to be heard; the rest ... are historical dust”. On the other hand, Carr was “not averse to casting a protective mantle over extremists, however foolish or misguided he may think them to be”, because he admired the power that their convictions gave them – and because he was “deeply affected by the contempt for liberalism ... made fashionable in the last century by Hegel”.<sup>716</sup> Such “Hegelian realism”, was the source, Berlin alleged, of “the identification of what is good with what is successful,” and of History with “the big battalions, marching down a broad avenue, with all the unfulfilled possibilities, all the martyrs and visionaries, wiped out”. Morality itself, on this view, was founded on reason, which was identified with the course of history. Therefore, those who resisted history – who “wring their hands when they see the vast tragedies, the revolutions, the gas chambers, the appalling suffering through which humanity goes” -- were “not merely contemptibly blind ... but positively immoral.”<sup>717</sup>

Berlin charged that such “realism” reflected, not a clear-eyed, rigorous freedom from illusions, but the same longing to escape doubt and moral anguish that fueled utopianism. While some political realists were mere cynics, others tied themselves to the mast of “realism” as a way of resisting the torturous calls of their own consciences: by sinking into the mire, they sought to muffle agonizing, debilitating doubts. The price of such intellectual self-insulation was an anesthetizing of moral sentiments, and an abdication of a basic human practice of, and responsibility for, moral judgment.

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<sup>716</sup> Review of E. H. Carr, *Studies in Revolution*, *International Affairs* 27 (1951), 470–1; “Soviet Beginnings”, *Sunday Times*, 10 December 1950, 3; Letter to Kennan, 343. For more on Berlin relationship with Carr, see Cherniss, *A Mind and its Time*, chapter 5.

<sup>717</sup> *Freedom and its Betrayal*, 90-1, 95-8; HBIL, 96-7; “Vissarion Belinsky”, *Russian Thinkers* 190; “Historical Inevitability”, *Liberty* 112-4, 132..

Berlin was not entirely opposed to (or repulsed by) the spirit of “realism”. He admired a certain sort of *intellectual* toughness, even ruthlessness, marked by a searching, unsentimental skepticism, a rigorous demand for clarity, and an unsparing exposure of illusions, evasions, and muddle.<sup>718</sup> This may reveal a certain ambivalence, or tension, in Berlin's outlook; and in his intellectual life Berlin sometimes found himself torn between his admiration for philosophical rigor, and his opposition to reductionism. He also, as we shall see, admired *some* sorts of political toughness. But he was passionately opposed to the attitude of inhumanity, the lack of scruple and of compassion or concern for human beings who stood in the way of political goals, that he associated with political “realism”.

Indeed, on balance Berlin thought “unscrupulous trampling” worse than sentimentalism, and esteemed “warm-hearted idealism” and “defiance for its own sake ... sincerity, purity of motive, resistance in the face of all odds, noble failure” and “integrity as such” as “worthy of deep respect”. He supported individual defiance of the demands of “necessity”, and was gladdened when “men were prepared to defend their principles” against the “irresistible power” of historical inevitability. It was “dedication to ideals” that motivated resistance to evil, and led men and women to reassert, and in reasserting, redeem, claims to human dignity.<sup>719</sup>

Such dedication, however, needed a chastening dose of “‘real’ realism” (as opposed to

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<sup>718</sup> See Berlin to Meyer Schapiro, 5 January 1953, *Enlightening* ed. Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes (Chatto and Windus, 2009), 418; “Fathers and Children”, 317. Berlin's soft spot for a certain sort of ruthlessness in intellectual life is made clear in his admiring portrait of “J. L. Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy”, *Personal Impressions*, 130-46. On this theme see also Cherniss, *A Mind and its Time*, 5-10, 15-20.

<sup>719</sup> To Marion Frankfurter, 17 August 1950, *Enlightening* 188 “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will”, 207-8; “European Unity and its Vicissitudes”, 192-3, 199-200. See also *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Oxford University Press, 1996 [1939]), 62-3, 157, 206-7; Berlin to Stuart Hampshire, no date [conjecturally dated July 1937]; to Cressida Bonham Carter, 26 August 1938, *Flourishing*, ed. Henry Hardy (Chatto and Windus, 2004), 239, 279; “The Origins of Israel”, *The Power of Ideas*, 143-61 *passim*; “Chaim Weizmann”, *Personal Impressions* 38-41; “The Life and Opinions of Moses Hess”, *Against the Current*, 251; “The Birth of the Russian Intelligentsia”, *Russian Thinkers*, 143; “Vissarion Belinsky”, *ibid.*, 172.

“realism” as a euphemism for cynicism), if it was not to lead to fanaticism and folly.<sup>720</sup> And, as Berlin acknowledged, “the line between cynicism ... and an unflinching realism is at times not easy to draw.”<sup>721</sup> Passionate as he was in his opposition to both “realism” and utopianism, Berlin had to acknowledge that resisting the lure, and refuting the claims, of each was far more difficult than many of his fellow liberals admitted.

His rejection of both utopianism and “realism” was shaped by Berlin's deeply personal preoccupation with the competing claims of political responsibility and personal ethical integrity. As a young man, he had resisted the tendency toward activism in the turbulently politicized 1930s, without being politically indifferent. In the post-war period he struggled to keep a distance from the activities of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and other liberal anti-Communist ventures. The strongest pull, however, was probably from the Zionist movement and the newly created State of Israel – particularly from Chaim Weizmann, who insistently called upon Berlin to enter the service of the new state. There is thus a heavy autobiographical subtext to Berlin's account of Weizmann's ethic of political responsibility, which held that it was “an absolute duty” to “take part in the world's affairs”. Weizmann condemned “the withdrawal from life on the part of those to whom their personal integrity, or peace of mind, or purity of ideal, mattered more than the work upon which they were engaged and to which they were committed”; he thought “political monasticism” a “mixture of weakness and self-conceit”, which was “foolish and despicable”. In praising Weizmann, Berlin somewhat equivocally endorses this

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<sup>720</sup> To unknown correspondent, Berlin Papers 228/250.

<sup>721</sup> “The Originality of Machiavelli”, 49.



view – at least, he judiciously declares it “superior to its opposite”.<sup>722</sup> Yet he was chary of political engagement, and devoted to the values of private life; he persisted, against Weizmann’s cajoling, in withdrawing from a political world for which he had lost his stomach, and a movement that he found increasingly difficult to embrace without deep reservation.<sup>723</sup>

It is possible that in his praise of Weizmann Berlin gave voice to a view of the priority of political responsibility which he either did not share, or shared but could not act on. There is, however, another, more interesting, way of reading Berlin. This starts from the observation that in his characterization of Weizmann’s attack on “political monasticism”, Berlin invokes two different sorts of “purists”: those who make a frank choice in favor of personal purity, and thus withdraw from public life; and those who put their purity and peace of mind higher “than the work upon which they were engaged and to which they were committed”. In the latter case, the decision to place personal purity first looks like a failure to admit, or understand, what one’s own commitments really demand of one. Berlin’s objection to “monasticism”, then, reflects not a rejection of private life for the sake of civic commitment, but an objection to a certain way of thinking about values – one composed of an anti-pluralist refusal to acknowledge conflicts of values, and a self-serving refusal to recognize that there are prices to be paid for undeviating adherence to personal morality. “Purity” was the wrong way to think of the moral state of those who rejected the compromises – even the moral trespasses – of social life: they, too, were choosing to serve some values, to pursue one sort of good, to the detriment of others.<sup>724</sup>

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<sup>722</sup> “Chaim Weizmann”, 53-4.

<sup>723</sup> See Arie Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (Palgrave, 2012), 187.

<sup>724</sup> This reading admittedly goes beyond Berlin’s actual text, but is consistent with his more general “pluralist” stance. It also recalls the critique of Tolstoy’s asceticism by George Orwell (as do many of the claims I have traced to Berlin here). See Orwell, “Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool” (1947), *All Art is Propaganda*, 316-36.

In insisting on this point, Berlin reformulated the conflict between political and personal morality without resolving it. While (Berlin's) Machiavelli was not a “realist” in sundering politics drastically from morality, he did present a stark choice between personal and public virtues and duties: “One can save one’s soul, or one can found or maintain or serve a great and glorious state”.<sup>725</sup> To seek to do both was intellectually muddled and politically crippling. Machiavelli thus rejected compromise, moderation, the attempt to find a middle path that would allow one to navigate between the two opposed moralities.<sup>726</sup> Berlin, while affirming this assertion of a genuine and (theoretically) insurmountable conflict between the moral demands of political responsibility and personal moral purity, did not embrace so drastic a position. As we shall see, in his accounts of individual thinkers and statesmen he sought not only to analyze the nature of political “greatness”, but to show how it could coexist with the preservation of a threshold of decency.

Berlin's thinking about political ethics thus centered on two distinct, though intertwined, ambivalences. The first consisted in the “liberal predicament”, caught between hatred of existing injustice and oppression, and fear of the brutal practice and fanatical character of radicalism. The second was a response to the conflicting claims of “realism” and “idealism” as personal dispositions, and political responsibility and personal decency as ethical ideals. Characteristically, he revealed his views on these conflicts through his portraits of individual philosophers, publicists, and political leaders.<sup>727</sup> Berlin's discussion of such individual

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<sup>725</sup> “The Originality of Machiavelli”, 50; see also *ibid.*, 46, 55.

<sup>726</sup> *Ibid.* 47 [citing *Discourses* I:26], 64.

<sup>727</sup> Reading Berlin's accounts of individual thinkers as explorations of the dynamics and implications of political ethics and ethos runs the risk of transforming particular individuals, with all their personal idiosyncracies and in

“exemplars” offer a fuller understanding of the errors and dangers of both “utopianism” and “realism” – and the particularly sinister synthesis of these elements in contemporary totalitarianism. At the same time, Berlin's portraits point to virtues and insights that can fortify liberalism against these dangers.

**B. Political Ethics and Ethical Exemplars: Berlin's Portraits of Realism and Idealism**

Berlin's accounts of individual political militants and fanatics reveal the interplay of dispositions of character, political (or philosophical) doctrine, and personal ethical outlook in inspiring ruthless, destructive political action. A prime example is Berlin's critical portrait of the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. Bakunin's critique of what he took to be Marx's incipiently authoritarian statism might be expected to have appealed to Berlin. But for Berlin, Bakunin was of interest in presenting “not social theory or political doctrine, but an outlook and a temperament,” which revealed the dangers of infatuation with abstract ideas and speculative theories, and the end-maximalist readiness to sacrifice principles and persons to the realization of these theories in reality.

Bakunin was a serial revolutionary who never encountered (or dreamed up) an uprising that he didn't seek to join (or commandeer). The result was generally short-lived glory, followed by disaster. Bakunin's penchant for unscrupulous intrigue was motivated in part by failures of perception and sentiment – the way in which infatuation with intoxicating theories blinded him to mundane realities. Bakunin was moved by “hatred of slavery, oppression, hypocrisy, poverty, *in the abstract*”, unaccompanied by “actual revulsion against their manifestations in concrete instances”. The lives and fates of individuals “did not greatly concern him; his units were too

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their particular circumstances, into more abstracted “exemplars” of general positions. This is a tension present in Berlin's work, as well as in the analysis of that work which follows.

vague and too large”. In his “love of humanity in the abstract”, Bakunin was ready “to wade through seas of blood”; this made him an exemplar of “the tradition of cynical terrorism and unconcern for individual human beings”.<sup>728</sup>

Bakunin also exemplified a *maximalist* model of political reasoning: as his friend Herzen reported, Bakunin was “not too much given to weighing every circumstance” because he “looked only towards the ultimate goal”.<sup>729</sup> But other Russian revolutionaries were similarly ideologically intoxicated and maximalist. In Bakunin there was something more: an *irresponsibility* in his attitudes to his own actions and theories, and to political realities and the lives of others: a “cynical indifference to the fate of individual human beings, a childish enthusiasm for playing with human lives for the sake of social experiment, a lust for revolution for revolution's sake”, because he found “chaos, violence, upheaval ... boundlessly exhilarating”.<sup>730</sup> In his personal life and political practice Bakunin was always ready to spend profusely, recklessly – and let someone else pick up the tab.

Bakunin's lack of 'realism' about political prospects, and his irresponsible and destructive behavior toward others, reflected a blindness to quotidian, particular human realities – which, in turn, arose from an underlying tendency to treat politics (and philosophy) as a source of personal emotional or aesthetic expression and satisfaction. Berlin, one senses, was particularly disapproving of Bakunin's irresponsibility – but had to admit that Bakunin was, in his own abstracted way, inspired by generous ideals. And there were worse forms of political

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<sup>728</sup> HBIL, 117, 120-23, 126, 127, 129.

<sup>729</sup> Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 566, 580.

<sup>730</sup> “German Romanticism in Petersburg and Moscow”, *Russian Thinkers* 165-6.

extremism. Later Russian revolutionaries, and the anti-liberals of Berlin's day, combined the intoxication with violence and conspiracy exhibited by Bakunin with a pessimistic and deflationary “realism”; less reckless, they were even more ruthless. Berlin identified this convergence particularly with (Leninist) Communism, with its “mixture of Utopian faith and brutal disregard for civilised morality.”<sup>731</sup>

While this seems to cast Communism as liberalism's antipode, Berlin asserted that Communism and liberal reformism shared a number of “central doctrines”: “human perfectibility, the possibility of creating a harmonious society ... the compatibility (indeed the inseparability) of liberty and equality”, as well as a rejection of “utopian” failures to think realistically about the connection between ends and means.<sup>732</sup> Communism was indeed more realistic about the means necessary to achieve its aims than liberalism had been; this was a key part of its appeal. After “the libertarian slogans of the pre-1848 period, which rested on moral ideals alone” were “rendered bankrupt, in the eyes of the realists, by the failures of these revolutions”, those opposed to the reign of reaction sought “drier light, realistic plans, an assessment of what the facts were, and what could be done by real men rather than angels”. Many were drawn to Marx's work by its “very harshness” and “anti-heroic realism”.<sup>733</sup> A similar pattern had repeated itself in the 1930s. Communism thus offered a cautionary tale for liberals committed to humanitarian values and rationalist assumptions, and shaken by the pressures of political struggle, or tempted by the attractions of toughness.

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<sup>731</sup> “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century” (PITC), *Liberty* 71.

<sup>732</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>733</sup> “Marxism and the International in the Nineteenth Century”, SR 149.

The goal of combining “realism” about human possibilities with commitment to idealistic goals was a worthy one; where had Marxism gone wrong? What were the errors that its opponents should avoid emulating?

“Communism”, Berlin declared, was “doctrinaire humanitarianism driven to an extreme in the pursuit of effective offensive and defensive methods.” The two elements adduced here are both important: the doctrinaire spirit in which emancipatory goals were embraced, and a view of politics as a life-and-death struggle in which winning was paramount. The former element was closely related to maximalism in the conception of ends. Marx and his followers came to identify human liberation with radical transformation and purification through a revolutionary “cataclysm”. This way of thinking about their ultimate goal shaped the way in which Communists thought about means. For Lenin and his followers, contribution to the success of the revolution became the the *sole* and *sufficient* criterion for judging actions: “if the revolution demanded it, everything – democracy, liberty, the rights of the individual – must be sacrificed to it”. This absolute prioritization of the success of the revolution, combined with the radicalism of the goal, led to the endorsement and cultivation of a particular sort of revolutionary ethos, marked by consistency, resolution, and hardness. A Marxist revolution could not be achieved by “men obsessed by scrupulous regard for the principles of bourgeois liberals”. Indeed, preoccupation with liberal scruples evidenced “a lack of seriousness.”<sup>734</sup>

The combination of utopianism and realism fostered not only dispositional ruthlessness, but institutional authoritarianism. While Lenin's goals were “oddly Utopian”, his practice was “strangely like that of those irrationalist reactionaries” – Pareto, Nietzsche, Maistre – whose low

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<sup>734</sup> PITC 69-71; “Marxism and the International”, 128, 148, 154.

estimation of human nature led them to embrace political authoritarianism and the propagation of doctrine and myth. Seeing the revolutionary movement faced with a choice between a strategy of education, which “might lead to a vast deal of discussion and controversy similar to that which divided and enfeebled the intellectuals”, and the conversion of the proletariat into “an obedient force held together by a military discipline and a set of perpetually ingeminated formulae [...] to shut out independent thought”, Lenin regarded it as “mere irresponsibility to stress the former,” since the masses were “too stupid and too blind to be allowed to proceed in the direction of their own choosing”.<sup>735</sup>

In Berlin's account doctrine and disposition are tightly interwoven. What distinguished Lenin was not merely the content of his theory, but the “single-minded consistency” with which he held to it. Lenin, and Trotsky, represented a particular facet of ruthlessness: a *doctrinaire* ethos of rigid consistency and quashing of countervailing considerations and sentiments. Berlin defined a doctrinaire as “a man who is liable to suppress what he may, if he comes across it, suspect to be true” if it conflicts with his doctrine, which serves him as an authoritative guide to what “to think and feel and do”, and thereby determines his perceptions, priorities, and “everyday conduct”. In applying to everything “a rigorous Marxist scale of values”, Trotsky believed that “the more (in terms of factual truth or personal inclinations) it cost him to do it, the more serious and true to his principles” he was. The willful subordination of sentiment and practical judgment to the dictates of doctrine, which encouraged “lack of interest in people, arrogant contempt for most of them and absence of genuine personal relations”, and “terrific blindness to the smaller, more delicate elements of human social texture”, left Trotsky both

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<sup>735</sup> PITC 72-4.

morally blinkered and, ultimately, politically vulnerable.<sup>736</sup>

The combination of humanist ideals with hard-headedness about political realities need not result in end-maximalist ruthlessness or doctrinaire fanaticism – as Berlin sought to show in his portraits of the man he identified as his hero: Alexander Herzen.

Herzen was, at first sight, a strange hero and model for Berlin. An aristocrat who idealized the peasant commune, he despised bourgeois liberals as “feeble, unrealistic, and cowardly”, and liberal regimes as “traps called oases of liberty”, behind whose vaunted protection of rights lay the ever-present threat of state violence.<sup>737</sup> But if Herzen was a revolutionary, he was a “revolutionary without fanaticism”, opposed to the ruthlessness and complacency of conservatives, liberals, and radicals, and to the blind-spots of “realists” (such as Bismark and Marx) and “idealists” alike. Herzen offered, not a system, but the model of a “liberal attitude”<sup>738</sup> – a combination of *moral sentiments and values*, *ethical tastes*, and an *intellectual sensibility* and related *sense of reality* – which offered an alternative model of how to engage in morally-inspired social reform to those provided by Bakunin's irresponsible political romanticism and maximalism, and Bolshevism's grim fanaticism and cynical use of power politics.

Herzen's *moral sentiments* centered on a defense of human dignity and agency against “those vast cosmologies which minimise the role of the individual, curb his freedom, repress his desire for self-expression”; and a rejection of calls to sacrifice living individuals' moral claims

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<sup>736</sup> “Marxism and the International”, 127-8, 139, 147; Berlin to David Astor, 14 May 1958, *Enlightening* 624 (the latter reference is not to Trotsky, but to Isaac Deutscher).

<sup>737</sup> HBIL 109-110.

<sup>738</sup> Ibid 99. This attribution of a “liberal attitude” to the revolutionary, socialist Herzen indicates how far Berlin saw the dispositions, sensibility and spirit of liberalism as detachable from (classical) liberal policies and doctrines.



for the sake of distant goals. This was partly because the future was drastically unknowable. It was usually impossible to predict whether any particular goal would be attained by the means employed in its pursuit. Furthermore, even if the goals of political visionaries could be realized, it was uncertain that, once achieved, these projected states-of-affairs would work out well for the human beings affected by them. Many of the problems that would face future generations be foreseen in advance; as a result, it was not possible to know what political and social arrangements would be best suited to deal with those problems. This made the (desirable) goals of political striving, as well as its chances of success, impossible to fix with certainty.

Also central to Herzen's moral perspective was his opposition to the sacrifice of living individuals for “the felicity of future generations” because such sacrifices involved treating those who paid the price as mere instruments for the benefit of others – “caryatids supporting a floor for others some day to dance on”, or “wretched galley slaves who, up to their knees in mud, drag a barge . . . with the humble words ‘progress in the future’ upon its flag”. To justify the sufferings of those who make history with the promise that “after their death all will be beautiful on earth” was to mock their efforts and devalue their lives. Far better to work for short-term, achievable goals that could be safely predicted, based on knowledge of immediate circumstances, and to strive for the benefit of the human beings we know.<sup>739</sup>

Herzen's intellectual sensibility was marked, above all, by a suspicion of ideal theories and abstractions. There was something absurd about the very formulation of general questions about *the* meaning of life, or *the* goal or meaning of history: “such questions made sense only if they were made specific,” and the answers to them “depended on the specific ends of specific

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<sup>739</sup> Ibid., 105, 128; “Alexander Herzen”, *Russian Thinkers* 239; “A Revolutionary without Fanaticism”, *The Power of ideas*, 97 ; “The Pursuit of the Ideal”, 16.

human beings in specific situations; human beings and their relationships were “too complex for standard formulae and neat solutions, and attempts to adapt individuals and fit them into a rational schema ... always lead in the end to a terrible maiming”.<sup>740</sup>

Against the idolatry of abstractions and distant goals, Herzen advocated not only political and social freedom, but a practice of *seeing freely*. No-one and nothing should be exempt from “criticism and denial”; “no ideal at which one was forbidden to smile was worth anything at all”. Seeing freely required not only skepticism, but *irreverence*. Such irreverence was not tantamount to cynicism or lack of seriousness; quite the contrary. To resort to solemn worship of abstractions was itself intellectually un-serious: the suspension of critical thought was an evasion of intellectual responsibility, and a failure of honesty.<sup>741</sup>

This call for a cultivation of a disposition of irreverence and skepticism is reminiscent of Niebuhr’s praise of the wisdom of humor – save that it does not entail either the forbearing tolerance of others to which Niebuhr linked humor. But Herzen did, like Niebuhr, link the proclivity toward skeptical questioning to a sense of humility. This is revealed in Herzen’s account of science (which was not noted by Berlin, but which is likely one of the many features of Herzen’s outlook which Berlin found attractive). For Herzen, “science” was identified, revealingly, with an attitude rather than a method. : “[E]ven more than the Gospel”, science “teaches us humility. She cannot look down on anything, she does not know what superiority means, she despises nothing, never lies for the sake of a pose, and conceals nothing out of coquetry. She stops before the facts as an investigator, sometimes as a physician, never as an

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<sup>740</sup> HBIL, 101, 103, 118, 127-8; “Alexander Herzen”, 216, 218-19, 227, 220, 234, 236; “A Revolutionary without Fanaticism”, 94.

<sup>741</sup> HBIL 103-4; “A Revolutionary without Fanaticism”, 99-100, 102.

executioner, and still less with hostility and irony.”<sup>742</sup>

Herzen's humility crucially shaped his political outlook, making him an opponent of paternalistic and elitist approaches to political rule and reform. He warned that the “pedagogic method of our civilising reformers is a bad one” because it started from the assumption that “we know everything and the people know nothing”. While it went without saying that “we can teach the people a great deal”, there was also “a great deal that we have to learn from them”. For “[w]ithout knowing the people we may oppress the people, we may enslave them, we may conquer them, but we cannot set them free.”<sup>743</sup> This was a sentiment Berlin himself passionately expressed – one which lay at the heart of his particular conception of liberalism, with its opposition not only to outright tyranny, but to tutelary paternalism and technocratic condescension.<sup>744</sup>

While Herzen's conception of “science” encouraged humility, it also made him proudly independent of party lines and dogma. This independence reflected Herzen's *ethical tastes* – the sort of character and way of life that he valued. Herzen delighted in “the free play of individual temperament”, “spontaneity, directness, distinction, pride, passion, sincerity, the style and colour of free individuals”; he desired “the richest possible development of personal characteristics”, and found value in “the very irregularity” of human psychology. Much like Weber, he “detested conformism, cowardice, submission to the tyranny of brute force or pressure of opinion, arbitrary violence, and anxious submissiveness”; he was moved to “moral fury” by “the

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<sup>742</sup> Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts* trans. Constance Garnett, ed. Dwight Macdonald (University of California Press, 1982), 639.

<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, 649-50.

<sup>744</sup> I stress this facet of Berlin's thought in *A Mind and its Time*, 56, 88-11 *passim*, 142, 190-91, 195, 207-9, 219, 222-4.

humiliation of the weak by the strong”, “insult by one side, and grovelling by the other”.<sup>745</sup> In stressing this element in Herzen’s outlook, Berlin used Herzen (as he elsewhere used Mill) to express the *positive* ethical content of liberalism. The liberal ethos Berlin extolled may have represented an antidote or prophylactic to ruthlessness and fanaticism; but it also reflected an affirmation of individuality and variety – and a vision of a good (if imperfect) society of free human beings.<sup>746</sup>

Herzen also furnished Berlin with an example of how skepticism about the claims of ideology and the realizability of ideals could be combined with respect for idealistic sentiment. Herzen admired noble, sincere, generous impulse, however mistaken, and “never amused himself at its expense.”<sup>747</sup> Yet he was aware of the danger of being guided by *blind* passion: thus he recalled that in 1848 “there was more heroism, more youthful self-sacrifice, than good judgment; and the pure, noble victims fell, not knowing for what.”<sup>748</sup> While Herzen never scorned idealism, he also resisted giving himself over completely to feeling, however noble. This reflected the “ambivalent, contradictory play of his nature – suspicion and denial on the one hand and blind faith on the other”.<sup>749</sup>

Berlin found *both* sides of Herzen's nature attractive. He cherished Herzen for being an idealist who was free from “prostration before the ... spectacle of triumphant power and violence, from contempt for weakness as such, and from the romantic pessimism which is at the

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<sup>745</sup>“Alexander Herzen”, 234; HBIL 99.

<sup>746</sup> I return to this point in the final section of this chapter.

<sup>747</sup> “Alexander Herzen”, 217.

<sup>748</sup> *My Past and Thoughts*, 384.

<sup>749</sup> “Alexander Herzen”, 217, 219.

heart of the nihilism and fascism”, as well as from the “note of sardonic, gloating joy” present in the writings of Hegel and Marx.<sup>750</sup> But he also appreciated Herzen’s warnings against the dangers of unrealistic trust in human benevolence or progress, and “superstitious faith in republics” – and the potentially oppressive force of moral impulse itself.<sup>751</sup> Herzen’s ethical vision and psychological perception provided an antidote to the danger of morally-inspired tyranny not only because he was skeptical of utopian expectations, but because he appreciated the potential dangers of the moralizing impulse itself. Those who sought to create a more moral society – whether by ruthless means *or* through more gradual and flexible reforms – must be careful that those they seek to help and to improve not end up “tamed and suppressed disinterestedly by idealists in the name of altruism”; they must be on guard against the dangers that nobly unselfish and benevolent sentiments, could inspire both in reformist activists, and their subjects.<sup>752</sup>

Berlin prized Herzen's combination of awareness of the dangers of self-righteousness and political sentimentalism with a defense of idealistic sentiment and moral standards. Herzen denied that “only scoundrels can achieve things”, that to change the world one must be “brutal and violent, and trample with hob-nailed boots on civilisation and the rights of men”. He insisted, to the contrary, that “[u]nless civilisation – the recognition of the difference of good and bad, noble and ignoble, worthy and unworthy – is preserved”, unless there are some who are “both fastidious and fearless, and free”, there was no point to pursuing revolutionary change: for

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<sup>750</sup> HBIL 112.

<sup>751</sup> “A Revolutionary without Fanaticism”, 97 (quoting *My Past and Thoughts*).

<sup>752</sup> “Alexander Herzen”, 229; HBIL 119.

a decent, humane order will not come out of sinking oneself “into a vast, impersonal, grey mass of barbarians marching to destroy”.<sup>753</sup> Herzen had the courage, independence and integrity to be skeptical and idealistic, self-questioning and committed; and the intelligence, sensibility and moral seriousness to see the virtues and faults of many sides clearly – and commit to action nonetheless. The romantic Russian revolutionary thus articulated and exemplified an ethos for disillusioned and doubting liberals who were “not prepared to sacrifice their right to doubt and differ for the sake of obedience and security”.<sup>754</sup>

Despite his admiration for Herzen, Berlin's politics and temperament clearly differed from those of the nomadic revolutionary agitator. His response to political affairs often seemed closer to that of Herzen's contemporary, the novelist Ivan Turgenev. Indeed, for Berlin Turgenev embodied the predicament of “the well-meaning, troubled, self-questioning liberal”, unable to commit fully either to defending the *status quo*, or to overthrowing it. He “wished to march with the progressives, with the party of liberty and protest”; however “wrong-headed, barbarous, contemptuous of liberals like himself” the young radicals were, he “could not bear to turn his back on them”. For “the evils that they wished to fight were evils; their enemies were, to some degree, his enemies too”. But nor could he accept the “dogmatism ... arrogance ... destructiveness ... appalling ignorance of life” he saw in them.<sup>755</sup>

This has led Berlin's biographer to conclude that “it was not Herzen but Turgenev ... who

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<sup>753</sup> “Alexander Herzen”, 236.

<sup>754</sup> “A Revolutionary without Fanaticism”, 97, 101, 102.

<sup>755</sup> Berlin to Andrej Walicki, 26 June 1970; to idem., 14 November 1975; “Fathers and Children”, 315-16, 334, 348.

became a lifelong mirror” and “hero” for Berlin.<sup>756</sup> Others prefer to identify Herzen as the true hero of Berlin's work<sup>757</sup> – or insist that he should have been.<sup>758</sup> Both of these views are plausible. What they do not convey is that, by making the case for *both* Herzen and Turgenev, Berlin was confronting ambiguities and conflicts within a liberal ethos – and showing two overlapping but divergent variations of that ethos which, put into critical dialog, could guide liberals away from their own weaknesses, and the temptation of emulating their opponents.

Cautious and skeptical, “self-critical and self-effacing”, Turgenev was able to understand and to convey the “multiplicity of interpenetrating human perspectives ... nuances of character and behaviour, motives and attitudes”. This reflected the fact that for Turgenev “everything is compounded of characteristics in a perpetual process of transformation, infinitely complex, morally and politically ambivalent ... explicable only in terms of flexible and often impressionistic psychological and historical concepts”. He accordingly rejected systems and ideologies as incapable of withstanding the irregularity of reality.<sup>759</sup> Yet Turgenev's “inveterate habit of doing justice to the full complexity and diversity of goals, attitudes, beliefs” often left him politically adrift. Furthermore, Turgenev's cultivated ambivalence could appear “somewhat complacent”: “He seemed to enjoy his very doubts”.<sup>760</sup> This was an attitude fitted to art, but not

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<sup>756</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (Henry Holt, 1998), 71, 258

<sup>757</sup> See Aileen Kelly, “A Complex Vision”, introduction to *Russian Thinkers*.

<sup>758</sup> Alan Ryan, “Isaiah Berlin: The History of Ideas as Psychodrama”, *European Journal of Political Theory* 12:1 (January 2013), 61-73.

<sup>759</sup> “Fathers and Children”, , 302, 308, 310-11, 303, 338, 350; “German Romanticism in Petersburg and Moscow”, 168-9. This resembles Berlin's own conception of reality as composed of a multitude of “constantly changing, multicoloured, evanescent, perpetually overlapping data, too many, too swift, too intermingled to be caught and pinned down and labeled”, and his conception of the “sense of reality” or “practical judgment” as depending on the ability to perceive and integrate these data (“Political Judgment”, 46).

<sup>760</sup> “Fathers and Children”, 310, 338.

politics. His work was not only troubling, but potentially paralyzing: “the reader is left in suspense, in a state of doubt; central problems are raised, and for the most part left unanswered”.<sup>761</sup> Berlin was ambivalent about Turgenev's ambivalence, with its tendency toward a passive, non-committal pose of contented indecision: such “emotional neutrality” seemed impossible, irresponsible, and even intolerable in the face of the crimes and agonies of politics in Berlin's time.

Despite these reservations, Berlin denied that Turgenev was a mere aesthete, evasive of the hard realities of political life. Circumstances forced him to recognize the responsibility of the artist – of all morally serious members of society – to come to terms with politics.<sup>762</sup> Turgenev's instincts reflected what Berlin saw as the fundamental ambivalence of liberalism, caught between radical sympathies and conservative expectations – and between a sense of responsibility to engage in politics, and commitment to non-political goals and values, which liberals were not willing to wholly subordinate, in theory or practice, to the demands of public life. This made him reject both the vulgar consequentialism of younger radicals, who insisted that literature (and all other pursuits) be seen as merely instruments of social change; and the purism and withdrawal from politics preached by Tolstoy, to whom he wrote, “you loathe this political morass; true, it is a dirty, dusty, vulgar business. But there is dirt and dust in the streets, and yet we cannot, after all, do without towns.”<sup>763</sup> In Turgenev's rejoinder to the purist Tolstoy, Berlin found not just a balanced, responsible response to the competing claims of politics and

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<sup>761</sup> Ibid. 311; “German Romanticism in Petersburg and Moscow”, 168.

<sup>762</sup> “Fathers and Children”, 302.

<sup>763</sup> Turgenev to Tolstoy, 7 April 1858, quoted “Fathers and Children”, 307.



morality, but a welcome warning against the dangers and absurdities of excessive fastidiousness.

Like Herzen, Turgenev identified with those who protest, “with the victims, never the oppressors”. But his outlook was more pessimistic, and his temper more cautious and conservative: “The precarious framework of humane culture, the preservation of a minimum of decency, was everything to him. He was not too optimistic about the consequences of the social upheavals of his time, even when he favored them.” Change was needed; but it should take the form of “slow progress”, not radical upheaval which destroyed the present system root-and-branch, and left too little remaining to build a new society – and too little worth living for. Against Herzen's sometimes apocalyptic visions, Turgenev articulated a *reformist ethos* of “active patience ... not without some ingenuity, at times cunning”. In moments of crisis, “the incompetent come up against the unscrupulous”: the responsible, humane political actor – the reformist – must have the will to resist the latter and the skill to avoid being among the former. He must renounce both “blind, idolatrous adoration” and political sentimentality, and political brutality; he must possess both determination and a moral compass, and “practical good sense”.<sup>764</sup>

Here we must distinguish, more clearly than did Berlin, between Turgenev's own example, and his prescription. This distinction is best illustrated by Turgenev's *Virgin Soil*. The character of Nezhdanov, a would-be revolutionary whose efforts end in failure and suicide, is shown to be temperamentally unsuited to both the “harsh discipline” of the revolutionary politics he embraces, and the “slow and solid work” undertaken by the practical reformer Solomin. Turgenev's cautious liberalism was closer to Solomin's political course than Nezhdanov's. But

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<sup>764</sup> “The Gentle Genius”, *New York Review of Books*, 27 October 1983; “Fathers and Children”, 337-9.

Berlin detected authorial identification in Turgenev's diagnosis of the root of Nezhdanov's tragedy: the fact that he was too complex, internally divided and sensitive for the demands of political action – and that he was temperamentally “unable to simplify himself”.<sup>765</sup> To do well in politics, one must be a solid, practical Solomin rather than a Nezhdanov – or a Turgenev. But Turgenev's vision and temper can nevertheless contribute to the political imagination, and thus ethos, of practical reformers, in a way that revolutionary romanticism cannot: by reminding them of the complexity and losses of even the most carefully, skillfully and patiently executed social program, and the need for sensitivity and empathic imagination. It can also serve as a warning to the Nezhdanovs of the world: to eschew the romance of revolutionary agitation and conspiracy, and seek either to learn the modest way of Solomin – or, like Turgenev, devote themselves to awakening citizens' consciences, expanding their imagination, and cultivating their understanding of complexity. Direct political advocacy is not the only way to serve the cause of political reform.

Both Turgenev's political ineffectuality and his politically useful insights can be traced back to what, for Berlin, was one of his most noteworthy attainments: his skill at entering into “beliefs, feelings and attitudes alien and at times acutely antipathetic” to his own. Such empathy made it difficult for Turgenev to commit himself confidently to a firm position of his own. At the same time, empathy could be politically useful. First, it contributed to an ability to understand – and thus, potentially, to act successfully within – political struggles, by comprehending the motivations of opponents. Second, empathy fostered a more liberal and democratic perspective on the goals of political action – one which was broad enough to do partial justice to the

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<sup>765</sup> “Fathers and Children”, 335, 341 (for source of quotation, see Turgenev, *Virgin Soil*, trans. Constance Garnett [New York Review Books, 2000], 342).

concerns of opponents. As such, it could promote to (without being able to guarantee) an attitude of respect for opponents in the process of struggle, and compassion and magnanimity toward them in victory, which was both just, and might foster a more humane politics.<sup>766</sup>

This empathy was partly a matter of perceptual gifts, and a habit of mind averse to rigidity. But it was also a matter of motivation: it came from his curiosity, his desire to learn and to understand, which was the guiding principle of his work and thought. “Turgenev's curiosity was always stronger than his fears”.<sup>767</sup> This claim reflects a major concern of Berlin’s treatment of Turgenev: his confrontation with the problem of courage – a problem which frequently plagued liberals, and certainly haunted Berlin. Turgenev appeared “an equivocating old maid in politics”; the same charge was leveled against Berlin, and other liberals who lacked “the existential courage to stand and be counted.”<sup>768</sup> Against this charge, Berlin suggested that there was an integrity, even a courage, in Turgenev's very refusal to “rest comfortably in any doctrine or ideological system”.<sup>769</sup> As Turgenev admonished Herzen (in response to the latter’s romanticization of the Russian peasant), “you must have the courage to look the devil in *both* eyes”. There may be something ironic, even outrageous, in the timorous Turgenev accusing the outspoken revolutionary exile Herzen of lack of courage. But Berlin seems to have agreed that

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<sup>766</sup> On the importance of compromise to sustaining healthy democratic politics, see Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *The Spirit of Compromise* (Princeton, 2012); on the importance of sustaining an attitude of respect and consideration to the losers of democratic politics, even when one disagrees with them, see Bernard Williams, “Liberalism and Loss”, in Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla and Robert B. Silvers, eds. *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York Review Books, 2001), 91-103; idem., “Conflicts of Liberty and Equality”, *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Princeton, 2005), 115-127 (particularly 120ff).

<sup>767</sup> “Fathers and Children”, 301, 315.

<sup>768</sup> Ignatieff, 257-8, 333n41.

<sup>769</sup> “Fathers and Children”, 308, 311.

Turgenev (in this case) showed a brave lucidity in relinquishing illusions by which Herzen remained enthralled, because the latter “could not live long without faith”.<sup>770</sup>

Berlin did not solely identify with, or regard as simply superior, either Turgenev or Herzen. When writing from Herzen's perspective, he echoed Herzen's criticism of Turgenev's “peculiar chilliness” and enjoyment of his own irresolution; Berlin's remark that Herzen “cared far too violently” comes across more as praise than as criticism.<sup>771</sup> When writing from the perspective of Turgenev, he emphasized, and seemed to share, Turgenev's criticism of Herzen's fantasy of Russian agrarian socialism, and strove to defend Turgenev against Herzen's charges of being “a reed that bent too easily before every storm”.<sup>772</sup> Both Turgenev's scrupulous truthfulness and distance, and Herzen's ironical but passionate idealism, had value. Both highlighted aspects of the truth; both contributed to fostering a humane politics.<sup>773</sup> Herzen's romanticism and iconoclasm, and Turgenev's skepticism and patience, corrected and balanced one another. And both men were united both in their commitment to an ethic of humanity and honesty, and the integrity with which they adhered to this ethic. Both refused to believe that, on behalf of progress, he was “under a sacred obligation to suppress the truth, or pretend to think that it was simpler than it was, or that certain solutions would work although it seemed patently improbable that they could, simply because to speak otherwise might give aid and comfort to the enemy”. At the same time, they remained morally idealistic reformers, whose revulsion at the

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<sup>770</sup> *ibid.*, 310 (quoting from Turgenev's letter to Herzen, 8 November 1862), 308-9.

<sup>771</sup> “Alexander Herzen”, 231-2.

<sup>772</sup> “Fathers and Children” 339.

<sup>773</sup> In Niebuhr's terms, Turgenev was “above the battle”, and Herzen was “in it”; Berlin sensed the importance – but also the difficulty and costs – of being “both above the battle and in it”.

“brutality” and “fanatical belief in terrorist methods” of the younger radicals was balanced by a commitment to relieving human misery and oppression through political action.<sup>774</sup>

Each man's perspective and practice also had shortcomings. Herzen was an effective publicist, but too independent and frank to lead anything more than a movement of one for long. Turgenev's fairness, patient curiosity, awareness of every side of every issue and detachment from each, made him unsuited to political campaigning; he could offer portraits of the sort of character appropriate to effective, humane political action, but not an example of it. Both men, in their different ways, thus raised the question of the relationship between the temperament and values involved in a liberal ethos, and the ethical demands of political action.

### *C. Berlin on the Demands of Politics and the Ethos of Liberalism*

We thus return to the problem of the relationship between the demands of politics and those of morality, though now in a somewhat different register. We are also brought back to Weber's preoccupation with the qualities demanded of political leaders. Now the question is whether the personal qualities that contribute to identifying, and sustaining, an ethically scrupulous, liberal stance on political ends and means overlap – or are compatible – with the qualities necessary for political success. This is not a question to which Berlin's work furnishes any easy answer – even though he devoted considerable attention to both the nature of good political judgment broadly, and the interplay between the personal qualities and political actions of leading statesmen of his day.

Berlin's account of political judgment is strikingly similar to his characterization of Turgenev's artistic vision. Skillful politicians generally possess, first, a “sense of reality”. This

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<sup>774</sup> “The Gentle Genius”.

involves an “exceptional sensitiveness” to the “unique flavors” and “combination of characteristics” that distinguish each situation. These perceptual skills help to foster a capacity for “sensitive self-adjustment” to the situation at hand (which includes a sense of what conditions may be alterable, and what conditions must be accepted as more-or-less fixed, as well as a capacity to predict, without certainty but with a fair degree of success, what sorts of responses one’s actions will evoke from others). Effective politicians also have an ability to discriminate between those factors in a given situation which are truly significant, and the rest; and a capacity for improvisation based on a “sense of timing.” Combined with an *empathetic* “sensitiveness to the needs and capacities of human beings” (which is distinct from compassion or concern for their well-being), these skills constitute “human wisdom, ability to conduct one’s life or fit means to ends.”<sup>775</sup> Such skills are not in themselves sufficient for political success – they require combination with a motivational force (whether personal ambition, or devotion to a cause) to give them political direction and force.

Berlin’s account of “political judgment” is somewhat morally equivocal. The political figures he cites as exemplars of good judgment are a morally mixed bunch, in Berlin’s own eyes;<sup>776</sup> those figures he identifies as victims of their own lack of judgment include sympathetic humanitarian reformers (such as Joseph II) as well as murderous fanatics.<sup>777</sup> Political judgment then seems a morally neutral quality; and Berlin’s account of it would seem to either be a work

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<sup>775</sup> “The Sense of Reality”, 24-5, 33; “Political Judgment”, 45-6.

<sup>776</sup> Among those who exemplify the capacity for political judgment, Berlin lists not only such heroes of his as Lincoln, Cavour, Masaryk, and Franklin Roosevelt, but also Augustus, Richelieu, Peter the Great, Talleyrand, Frederick the Great, Napoleon, and the “far from admirable” Bismarck (Lenin is cited as an ambiguous case – a figure whose capacity for political judgment was ultimately overwhelmed by fanaticism) (“Political Judgment”, 42, 47-9, 51).

<sup>777</sup> Ibid., 47, 51; “The Sense of Reality”, 32.

of morally-neutral descriptive analysis – or to count as prescriptive or praising only if one adopts a “realistic” perspective according to which success serves as the criterion of ethical credit – the very perspective that Berlin attacked in Carr.

Yet Berlin suggested that the cultivation of political judgment, or a “sense of reality”, might indeed be connected to the promotion of a more humane politics – and that the dispositions which contributed to failures of political judgment also tended to produce inhumanity and suffering. As noted above, one element of political judgment was a sense of the actual needs and potential of human beings; this discouraged the tendency to demand too much of people, to not make allowances for their vulnerabilities and shortcomings. While political visionaries – those whose devotion to ultimate goals or general principles overwhelmed their sense of reality – often acted from humane impulses, their lack of realism or responsiveness to reality contributed to a slide into inhumanity. It was right to “fear those bold reformers who are too obsessed by their vision to pay attention to the medium in which they work” – the “medium” of human beings and their relationships; for such people, “there is a literal sense in which they know not what they do (and do not care either).”<sup>778</sup> Political visionaries were given to the folly of “Procrusteanism” – the impulse to force reality to fit the confines of their doctrines. As Berlin described the mental process of the Procrustean,

if the facts – that is, the behaviour of living human beings – are recalcitrant to such experiment, the experimenter becomes annoyed, and tries to alter the facts to fit the theory, which, in practice, means a kind of vivisection of societies until they become what the theory originally declared them to be. The theory is 'saved', indeed, but at too high a cost in useless human suffering...<sup>779</sup>

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<sup>778</sup> “Political Judgment”, 51.

<sup>779</sup> Ibid., 52. On Berlin's “anti-Procrusteanism” see Jonathan Allen, “Isaiah Berlin's Anti-Procrustean Liberalism: Ideas, Circumstances, and the Protean Individual”, online at <http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/onib/allen2003.pdf>; see also Cherniss, *A Mind and its Time*, 7-8, 18-19, 45.

On the other hand, Berlin did not consistently identify good judgment with success, and blind devotion to visionary goals with failure. While fanatics might often destroy themselves through their blindness, sheer passion and determination could sometimes be all too effective. Ruthlessness works: “Human lives *are* radically alterable, human beings can be re-educated and conditioned and turned topsy-turvy – that is the principal lesson of the violent times in which we live.”<sup>780</sup> But the results of such ruthless, unconstrained, unbalanced drive to realize political visions or ambitions were seldom what the actors had intended or envisioned – at least if they began from a commitment to moral ideals. Pragmatic, sensitive, responsive political judgment could serve petty ends and cynical motives; but they were also indispensable, in all but a very few, exceptional circumstances, to achieve anything morally worthy and desirable. The alternative approach of bludgeoning one's way through obstacles, so that one transformed the human reality around one, might produce success – the seizure of power, the eradication of opposition, the (short-term) alteration of society's scale of values – but it could not achieve the genuine realization of ideals.

Against both the “realist” ethic of ambition and success-worship, and a visionary approach to politics, Berlin favored a political character that combined concern and capacity for effectiveness (which was, in itself, demanded by a sense of responsibility) with a sense of personal decency. Integrating these elements was partly a matter of having certain moral commitments, or sentiments, which set limits on the pursuit of personal power. Thus, Churchill's deeply-ingrained “sufficiency of libertarian feeling” preserved him from becoming the

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<sup>780</sup> “The Sense of Reality”, 14-15.



demagogue that his willfulness and oratorical power would have allowed him to be.<sup>781</sup> Similarly, Weizmann's leadership reflected the decency of his goals, which were to enable his fellow Jews to "live a life worthy of human beings, without betraying their own ideals or trampling on those of others".<sup>782</sup> In addition to commitment to humane ends, an ethic for morally decent political leaders involved a particular way of thinking about goals. Weizmann's freedom from "that streak of bigoted rationalism which breeds belief in final solutions for which no price ... can be too high" was what saved him from both ruthlessness, and losing touch with political realities; Roosevelt's pragmatist flexibility not only allowed him to respond to political vicissitudes, but also prevented him from seeking to impose the "straitjacket of doctrine" on his people.<sup>783</sup> In such cases, a "sense of reality" and an approach to politics that eschewed inhumanity were deeply linked; but the connection was a feature of certain individual personalities which could be emulated – not of *necessary* psychological connections which could be relied upon.

The marriage of political astuteness to ethical decency also involved adherence to a personal code of conduct which drew *some* lines around the field of what was acceptable to do in pursuit of political efficacy. Thus, while Weizmann was apt to use his followers for his own ends and then forget them, and was willing to "conceal facts" and "work in secret", there were lines he would not cross. He "committed none of those enormities for which men of action ... claim justification, on the ground of what is called *raison d'état* – the notorious reasons of State which permit politicians caught in some major crisis to sacrifice the accepted standards and principles

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<sup>781</sup> "Winston Churchill in 1940", *Personal Impressions* 16.

<sup>782</sup> "Chaim Weizmann", 48-9.

<sup>783</sup> *Ibid.*, 45, 49; "President Franklin Delanno Roosevelt", *Personal Impressions* 32.

of private morality to the superior claims of State, or society, or Church, or party”. Weizmann was the opposite of – and his practice represented a rebuke to – fanatical and ruthless politicians:

He was not prepared to justify wrongdoing by appeals to historical or political necessity. He did not attempt to save his people by violence or cunning – to beat them into shape, if need be with the utmost brutality, like Lenin, or to deceive them for their own good, like Bismarck ... He never called upon the Jews to make terrible sacrifices, or offer their lives, or commit crimes, or condone the crimes of others, for the sake of some felicity to be realised at some unspecified date, as the Marxists did; nor did he play upon their feelings unscrupulously, or try deliberately to exacerbate them against this or that real, or imaginary, enemy, as extremists in his own movement have frequently tried to do. He wished to make his nation free and happy, but not at the price of sinning against any human value in which he and they believed.<sup>784</sup>

The models of these statesmen stood as a rebuttal to the “realist” contention that political efficacy required ruthlessness, by showing how a leader’s moral character, temperament and way of thinking about the morality of political action could contribute to his political authority over others, and thus his efficacy in achieving his goals. Thus Roosevelt’s example “strengthened democracy everywhere” by demonstrating that the pursuit of social justice and “a loose texture of society” were not incompatible with efficient government.<sup>785</sup> Weizmann’s personal integrity and “civilised and humane” sensibility were the foundation of his powerful appeal to both large numbers of the Jewish people, and gentile statesmen, who found themselves inspired or embarrassed into sympathetic action.<sup>786</sup>

Churchill, Roosevelt, and Weizmann were significant not only in combining political greatness with respect for moral standards, but in showing how this could be done in the context

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<sup>784</sup> “Chaim Weizmann”, 48-9, 52, 61.

<sup>785</sup> “President Franklin Delano Roosevelt”, 32-3.

<sup>786</sup> “Chaim Weizmann”, 45, 49, 52, 55.

of political crises of liberalism: for they found themselves having to act as leaders, either of a more-or-less stable democratic nation confronting internal crisis (Roosevelt); or of democracies confronting ruthless anti-democratic forces from without (Churchill and Roosevelt); or of a movement which lacked the resources of a stable state and political culture, and had to create these conditions for itself against both the infliction and the temptations of violence and repression (Weizmann).

Yet there are limits to how far their examples can serve as models for liberal-democratic *citizens* – or, indeed, for liberal-democratic politicians facing different circumstances. While they held back from extremes of ruthlessness, each of these leaders exhibited characteristics that were troubling from the perspective of private morality: they used followers and subordinates to their own ends, and enjoyed the exercise of power and political maneuver for their own sakes. By virtue of their roles, leaders such as Churchill, Roosevelt and Weizmann felt the demands of political life to an overwhelming degree. And, by virtue of their temperaments and tastes, they found political involvement, with all its moral hazards, exhilarating. This was not necessarily blameworthy, nor incompatible with the ethical demands of maintaining a *liberal* political morality – though it may be that the sustaining of liberal, democratic polities requires institutional, cultural, and political-ethical resources that can balance and constrain the force of such “charismatic” leaders.<sup>787</sup> In any case, figures such as Roosevelt, Churchill and Weizmann do not represent models that can be followed by those who find themselves having to navigate between the competing and conflicting demands of private and public life – between personal

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<sup>787</sup> Berlin did not address this point; for an exploration of the ethics of democratic leadership that stresses an ethical pluralism of roles, see Andrew Sabl, *Ruling Passions: Political Offices and Democratic Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

integrity and purity, and efficacy in political action: for they did not feel the pull of private life keenly, and the political situations they faced made their bias towards the demands of public life appropriate. For guidance as to how those whose positions, circumstances and temperaments make the conflict between the demands of political and private life more acute might navigate or balance between these demands, we must turn not to Berlin's accounts of political leaders or thinkers, but to his own prescriptions – and practice.

Berlin stressed the importance of considering not only the likely consequences of one's actions (even though these are impossible to predict with complete accuracy), but the *fit* between courses of action and one's own temperament. One should not seek to fulfill a role – as revolutionary, or statesman, or saint – for which one is not suited (or at a time when fulfilling the role will demand qualities or resources one lacks): “If the shoe does not fit it is no use saying that time and wear will make it less uncomfortable, or that the shape of the foot should be altered, or that the pain is an illusion”. Nor should one deceive oneself into thinking it possible to serve all the goods by which one is drawn through fulfilling the role(s) one does undertake. Berlin thus advocated “realism” about oneself – self-knowledge, an honest and accurate estimation of one's weaknesses and possibilities – as well as realism about the immediate and likely moral costs of particular choices and courses of action, as a crucial capacity for navigating both politics, and moral life more broadly.<sup>788</sup>

This sort of “realism” both demanded and aided personal *integrity*. For Berlin, integrity was opposed to subservience to a “total creed”, doctrine or movement, which required adherents to “squeeze the facts into iron frameworks of doctrine, against all that their hearts or consciences

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<sup>788</sup> “The Life and Opinions of Moses Hess,” *Against the Current*, 250–1; “Einstein and Israel”, *Personal Impressions*, 72.

tell them”.<sup>789</sup> It thus eroded the sense of identity and the moral and intellectual standards and virtues on which integrity is founded. True integrity – honesty, seriousness and responsibility in thinking about the demands, implications, and limits of one's commitments – constituted an ethical bulwark against fanaticism and falsification. As one friend summed up Berlin's view, “one should be honest about one's choices and shortcomings, and not seek probably specious justifications for them. Associated or consequent inconsistencies did not trouble him”, since such inconsistencies indicated, not “moral carelessness”, but a seriousness about and responsiveness to the morally-relevant particulars of diverse cases – and a recognition that there were no pat rules for deciding (for instance) when compromise is in order or not, or when discretion shades over into hypocrisy.<sup>790</sup>

Berlin identified the ethic of honesty, independence from dogma, self-questioning, and moderation which he advocated not only with integrity, but also courage. Where others identified integrity with adherence to fixed positions, and saw courage as depending on a bedrock of certainty, Berlin turned the tables.<sup>791</sup> Skepticism of dogma and sensitivity to one's own scruples could serve as the basis of that courage that allowed for the sustaining of doubt; integrity was revealed to lie in a critical independence from fixed positions, a willingness to admit uncertainty and to change course. While acknowledging his own over-eagerness to please, Berlin denied the

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<sup>789</sup> Berlin to David Astor, 14 May 1958, *Enlightening* 624. Cf Berlin's picture of J. S. Mill as an exemplar of integrity: “[Mill] was loyal to movements, to causes and parties, but could not be prevailed upon to support them at the price of saying what he did not think to be true” (“John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life”, 248-9).

<sup>790</sup> Peter Oppenheimer, “Run Over by Isaiah”, in Henry Hardy, ed. *The Book of Isaiah: Personal Impressions of Isaiah Berlin* (Boydell, 2009), 84.

<sup>791</sup> Thus he wrote that the “search for general principles of permanent reliability” was a “great weakness and vanity”: one should “have the courage ... to die for undemonstrated & unself-evident positions, not bolstered up by absolute faith”. (To Myron Gilmore, 26 December 1949, *Enlightening* 152.)

more general identification of hesitancy with “weakness or cowardice”. In fact, it required “a good deal of courage” to resist “magnetization” to one or another extreme position; maintaining a stance of moderation and balance was “notoriously exposed, dangerous and ungrateful”.<sup>792</sup> This sort of courage involved both firmness in the face of social and moral pressure from others; and fortitude in resisting the emotional satisfactions of certainty and simplicity.

Berlin recognized the difficulty of such a position – and the strong (and probably eternal) appeal of monism, utopianism, and belief in inevitable historical progress.<sup>793</sup> Against such satisfactions, he offered a view of political struggle as never-ending, and of political goals as imperfect, controversial, and temporary, since every solution to a social problem creates new, unforeseeable problems: “We cannot legislate for the unknown consequences of consequences of consequences.” While the worst evils that society creates may be fought, the problems that arise from the conflict of values and the gap between human aspirations and longings, and the capacities of human beings and their societies, “are perhaps not soluble at all”. The goal of political action should instead be the maintenance of an “unstable equilibrium” between conflicting human interests and wills, one which is “constantly threatened and in constant need of repair”. And the path to achieving even proximate, precarious goals will be uncertain: “There are no guaranteed methods, no sure paths to social welfare. We must try to do our best; and it is always possible that we shall fail”. This, Berlin ruefully acknowledged, was not likely “to inspire men to sacrifice and martyrdom and heroic feats”. It ran counter to the desire, shared by most human beings, for a “bold, universal, once-and-for-all panacea”: “It may be that men

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<sup>792</sup> “Fathers and Children”, 340-41, 342-3, 350.

<sup>793</sup> E.g. “The Pursuit of the Ideal”, 13-14; *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, 54-5, 77-8; “Two Concepts of Liberty”, 217; “The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West”, 47.

cannot face too much reality, or an open future, without a guarantee of a happy ending”. But such guarantees are illusions; even if such political “Sisyphism” was disappointing and “a little dull”, it was, Berlin insisted, truer to reality, and more humane to those who will be affected by political action.<sup>794</sup>

This disenchanted conception of the possibilities of political action demanded its own set of virtues: in Turgenev's words, “‘industry, patience, self-sacrifice, without glitter, without noise’”.<sup>795</sup> These virtues were hard to attain and sustain, and did not offer the satisfactions of flashier, more conventionally “heroic” qualities. Nor did the process of gradual, cautious improvement offer the emotional highs of rapid, dramatic moments of transformation, when the normal doubts and divisions of social life suddenly fall away. “Normal” politics – the politics involved in sustaining and improving societies – was not a realm in which the gratifications of transcendence or purity were to be sought.<sup>796</sup>

Berlin pointed to the difficulty, and importance, of another facet of the special type of courage demanded by liberal politics, and composing part of a liberal ethos: the *fortitude* needed to resist impulses toward anger, vengeance, and intransigence. His sharpest statement on this point arose in the course of his relationship with Weizmann. In late 1946, Weizmann sent Berlin the draft for an address he would deliver to the 22<sup>nd</sup> Zionist Congress in Basel, in which he attacked the resort to terrorism against the British Mandate as an insult to “the ideals for which a

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<sup>794</sup> “The Pursuit of the Ideal”, 14, 18-19; “Alexander Herzen”, 230; “Russian Populism”, 256; “Fathers and Children”, 341; “The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West”, 47; “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will”, 235-6.

<sup>795</sup> “Fathers and Children”, 346.

<sup>796</sup> As his discussions of Churchill and Weizmann make clear, Berlin was sensitive to the very different demands of “heroic” moments, in which politics must be created, or saved from destruction. But, as noted above, these pieces also make clear that Berlin believed that there remain moral constraints on politics – and dangers to an aestheticized conception of politics – even in such moments.

Jewish society must stand”, and a threat to Zionism's capacity to “appeal to the world’s liberal conscience”. At this point Berlin added a further paragraph, which appeared in the speech Weizmann delivered. Here Berlin took aim at the ethos of romantic heroism, which glorified desperate action and martyrdom:

It is not our purpose or our right to plunge to destruction in order to bequeath a legend of martyrdom to posterity. Zionism was to mark the end of our glorious deaths and the beginning of a new path leading to life. *Against the ‘heroics’ of suicidal violence I urge the courage of endurance, the heroism of superhuman restraint.* I admit that it requires stronger character, more virile nerves, than are needed for acts of violence. *Whether they can rise to that genuine courage, above the moral cowardice of terrorism,* is the challenge which history issues to our youth.<sup>797</sup>

Berlin's approach to the dilemmas facing Zionists – and his similar counsel of both determination and restraint in responding to Soviet Communism<sup>798</sup> – pointed to a central perception about political ethics: that the means used and the results achieved could not be drastically divorced. If Berlin, like Weber, recognized that morally admirable means did not always produce desirable results, he also held that the use of oppressive means on behalf of freedom and justice threatened the goals at which they aimed: as Herzen had warned, to cut off the heads of the current rulers could only lead to “a new tyranny and a new slavery”: “Houses for free men cannot be built by specialists in prison architecture”.<sup>799</sup>

This thought found echo in Berlin's resistance to calls for a “new faith” and greater social and ideological cohesion by his fellow defenders of liberal democracy. Berlin, identified as a potential “philosopher” of anti-Communism was often approached with requests to articulate a

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<sup>797</sup> Quoted in Henry Hardy, “A Deep Understanding”, *Jewish Chronicle*, 26 March 2004, 35–6; emphasis added.

<sup>798</sup> For a summary of this, see *A Mind and its Time*, 82–4.

<sup>799</sup> “Alexander Herzen”, 227–8.



statement of the basic principles of liberal democracy. While some of his work can be obliquely read as filling just that role,<sup>800</sup> Berlin resisted such calls. The “answer to Communism” was not “a counter faith, equally fervent, militant, etc. because one must fight the devil with the devil’s weapons”. On the contrary, there was “no point in defeating the other side if our beliefs at the end of the war are simply the inverse of theirs, just as irrational, despotic, etc.” The world of the Cold War suffered from too much, not little, faith; there was a need for “*less* Messianic ardour”, and more of “the inestimably precious gifts of scepticism and irony”, which were necessary to sustaining the tolerant, forbearing ethos of liberalism.<sup>801</sup>

Political leaders – and members of society more generally -we recognize that we cannot make- should recognize the limits of their wisdom, and adopt a modest – and liberal – attitude, respectful of the freedom of others. They – we – should “try to discover what others ... require, by taking off the spectacles of tradition, prejudice, dogma, and making it possible for ourselves to know men as they truly are, by listening to them carefully and sympathetically, and understanding them and their lives and their needs, one by one individually.” We should “at least try to provide them with what they ask for, and leave them as free as possible” – and, above all,

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<sup>800</sup> Thus, Leo Strauss somewhat patronizingly termed “Two Concepts of Liberty” an “anticommunist manifesto designed to rally all anticommunists” (“Relativism”, in Helmut Schoeck and James W. Wiggins, ed. *Relativism and the Study of Man* [Van Nostrand, 1961], 138). For more on the ambivalences and complexities of Berlin's relationship to “official” anti-Communist intellectual circles see Cherniss, *A Mind and its Time*, chapter 3.

<sup>801</sup> To Elliston, 30 December 1952, *Enlightening* 349-51; “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century”, 83, 86, 90, 92; “The Intellectual Life of American Universities”, *Enlightening* 750; to Henry Luce, 4 May 1950, *Enlightening* 180; to Gilmore, op. cit., *Enlightening* 152. See also Berlin to Alan Dudley, March 1948, *Enlightening* 44-8, where after initial demurral Berlin did offer a statement of liberal-democratic values – but with so many qualifications and skeptical or ironic asides that one of the Foreign Office officials who had sought his help remarked “there are large numbers of people in Europe, by no means necessarily unintelligent, who as a result of economic and intellectual stress and turmoil have turned to the dogmas of Marxism because they provide a plausible and authoritative creed unquestioned by their adherents ... These people do not want intellectual freedom.” (Geoffrey Aldington, quoted *ibid* 48 n.4.).

we must “stop torturing others in the name of what we do not know.”<sup>802</sup>

#### **D. Pluralism as an Ethos, and the Ethos of Liberalism**

Berlin’s articulation of a political ethos for liberals was influenced by his pluralism; at the same time, his advocacy of pluralism constituted part of his articulation of a liberal ethos. Berlin presented pluralism as a descriptive theory about the nature of human values, and it has generally been so treated. Here I want to look at pluralism in a different light: as an ethos which, while it recognizes the validity of a wide variety of ways of life and does not seek to rank them, nevertheless does affirm some conditions of human life and deplores others; and which guides the way in which we think about our moral lives, and particularly our political activities. Looked at from this perspective, the much-debated connection between liberalism and pluralism<sup>803</sup> may not be so much logical or justificatory, as phenomenological-psychological, and ethical-educative.<sup>804</sup> On this view, to accept *and internalize* pluralism as a way of regarding human

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<sup>802</sup> “Tolstoy and Enlightenment”, 296. Here, again, Berlin’s affinity to Shklar is notable: cf. “The Liberalism of Fear”, 7.

<sup>803</sup> See e.g. John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton University Press, 1993); George Crowder, “Pluralism and Liberalism”, *Political Studies* 42 (1994), 293–305; John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton University Press, 1996); Steven Lukes, “The Singular and the Plural: On the Distinctive Liberalism of Isaiah Berlin,” *Social Research* 61:3 (1994), 687–717; Kekes, *Against Liberalism* (Cornell University Press, 1997); Jonathan Riley, “Interpreting Berlin’s Liberalism”, *American Political Science Review* 95:2 (2001), 283–95; idem. “Defending Cultural Pluralism: Within Liberal Limits,” *Political Theory* 30:1 (2002), 68–96; Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* (Continuum, 2002); William Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Robert Talisse, “Can Value Pluralists Be Comprehensive Liberals?” *Contemporary Political Theory* 3:2 (2004), 127–39; idem. “Does Value Pluralism Entail Liberalism?”, *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 7:3 (2010), 303–20; Patrick Neal, “Systematizing the Unsystematic”, *Review of Politics* 68:1 (February 2006), 137–40; Matthew Moore, “Pluralism, Relativism, and Liberalism”, *Political Research Quarterly* 62:2 (2009), 244–56; Jason Ferrell, “Isaiah Berlin: Liberalism and Pluralism in Theory and Practice”, *Contemporary Political Theory* 8 (2009), 295–316; Ella Myers, “From Pluralism to Liberalism”, op.cit.

<sup>804</sup> Similar points have been made by Bernard Williams and Berlin himself (“Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply”, *Political Studies* 42 [1994], 306–9; Michael Walzer (“Are there Limits to Liberalism?”, *New York Review of Books*, 19 October 1995, 28–31) ; and Alex Zakaras (“A Liberal Pluralism: Isaiah Berlin and John Stuart Mill”, op. cit.).

values – and a perspective from which to form judgments and reach understandings of human activity generally – is to develop a certain relationship to the moral life, and a particular political temperament. The ethos of pluralism is marked by its own dispositional proclivities and demands: a reflexive suspicion of absolutism, zeal, and hastiness, and a reflective tendency to see as many sides of an issue, and to calculate the costs of a proposed course of action as accurately, as possible.<sup>805</sup>

A central element in an ethos of pluralism is an affirmation of variety and openness, and even friction and conflict, as features which should be not only tolerated, but encouraged; and a corresponding revulsion at the vision of a “fanatically tidy world of human beings joyfully engaged in fulfilling their functions” within a “rationally ordered, totally unalterable hierarchy”.<sup>806</sup> Berlin held that open-endedness and choice are basic ingredients in a truly human existence;<sup>807</sup> he also affirmed the value of preserving “the widest variety of human life and character”, of “diversity, versatility, fullness of life ... the variety and colour of untamed human beings with unextinguished passions and untrammelled imaginations.” Where no divergence, disagreement, or unexpected development is possible, “the inner life of man, the moral and spiritual and aesthetic imagination, no longer speaks at all.”<sup>808</sup> Berlin linked this affirmation of variety to the recognition that “it is *possible* to lead lives different from one’s own, & yet to be

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<sup>805</sup> On my view, these dispositions tend to be promoted by – and promote – a pluralistic perspective; it is not that pluralism identifies them as superior to alternative dispositions.

<sup>806</sup> “Historical Inevitability”, *Liberty* 112. Berlin thus shared Weber’s fear of a society dominated by “organization men” (for Berlin’s use of the phrase see e.g. “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life”, 228; see also *ibid* 241).

<sup>807</sup> E.g. “men are made human by their capacity for choice – choice of evil and good equally”; “freedom to choose and to experiment” is what “distinguishes men from the rest of nature” (“John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life”, 237, 251).

<sup>808</sup> *Ibid.*, 221, 228-9; “The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West”, 45-6; “The Pursuit of the Ideal”, 15.

fully human, worthy of love, respect or at least *curiosity*". Such insight into and acceptance of the difference of others undermined the arrogant illusion that one had a monopoly on virtue or wisdom, and the desire to fit others into one's own image, which lay at the root of intolerance.<sup>809</sup>

Berlin's exposition of pluralism was bound up with his embrace of *moderation*.

Employing the lens offered by Berlin's thought, we may understand moderation – whether as a feature of personal disposition and judgment, or of political positions and decisions – as involving a sustained effort to give due consideration to multiple values, principles, interests, or parties; and to preserve some minimum (or possibility for the realization) of competing or conflicting values, as well as the conditions necessary for a range of different values to receive their due. Moderation is founded on a striving for balance and inclusion, and an attempt settle conflict through trade-offs and compromises rather than opting for (or surrendering to) one side or another in the conflict. Such an understanding and practice of moderation can be seen as a plausible (though not the only) response to pluralism. Pluralism holds that there are many genuine human values, which are not all derived from a single source, or compatible in a single whole; and which impose real, non-overidable demands on human beings. We therefore have reason to minimize, even if we recognize that we cannot altogether prevent, the loss, sacrifice, or subordination of values, rather than wholly embracing some and disregarding others. If, in cases of conflicting values, none can be realized “fully and equally”, neither should any be “altogether deserted” or disregarded.<sup>810</sup>

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<sup>809</sup> “Notes on Prejudice”, *Liberty* 345-7.

<sup>810</sup> “Alexander Herzen”, 219. See also *ibid.*, 197; “Philosophy and Government Repression”, *The Sense of Reality*, 54. Cf. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 136-9. There have been a number of compelling objections advanced against this “moderate” response to pluralism (see e.g. Gray, Kekes, and Moore, *op.cits.*), which I cannot address fully here; in any case, my claim is not that this “moderate” response is the *only* plausible response to pluralism, but merely that it is one plausible one – and the one which fits into, and contributes to,

Pluralism also encourages moderation in the extent of aspirations, since on a pluralist view perfection is both impossible and incoherent. There can be no moral life without compromise, sacrifice loss; any improvement or increase with regard to some value or values will entail loss with regard to others. Moderate expectations, in turn, will tend to encourage moderation in the conduct of politics – a wariness of promising or demanding too much. And the ability to accept the implications of this outlook requires a disposition to discipline in one's own expectations, demands, and responses to disappointment.<sup>811</sup> This tendency is matched by a disposition to a policy of “trimming”, of seeking a balance between competing extremes, which Berlin stressed throughout his writings, particularly in his recurrent use of the trope of steering between Scylla and Charybdis.<sup>812</sup>

Pluralist moderation, in turn, requires or promotes several further dispositional capacities. One of these is *attentiveness* to the particulars of a situation – the facts of the case (including the potential consequences of different courses of action), the “distinctive character[s]” of the different values at play, and the characters, experiences, and needs of the human beings involved – as well as an empathetic capacity to appreciate the value of different activities, ways of life, ideals.<sup>813</sup> This fosters *respect* for, and *receptivity* to, different ways of life, different temperaments, activities, accomplishments, as well as a certain appraising distance from each. While each is recognized as valuable, each is also recognized as only one direction of value.

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Berlin's stance on political ethics and ethos.

<sup>811</sup> Cf. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism* 194; Galston, *Liberal Purposes*, 224-6.

<sup>812</sup> See e.g. “Historical Inevitability”, 106 n1, 151; “Georges Sorel”, *Against the Current* 303. On “trimming” and dispositional moderation cf. Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748-1830* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 3-7, 239-50.

<sup>813</sup> Crowder, 188-9, 191; Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 219.

This way of perceiving values encourages a *modesty* about one's choices, an openness to revision, and a picture of oneself as an agent who chooses among values none of which is final or all-defining.<sup>814</sup>

The tendency to see the value of a great many different ends, and to regard these ends as possible but not obligatory choices, will tend to foster a live-and-let-live attitude, and a desire to be left free to come and go, to withdraw and recommit (or not commit) oneself to a given project. This attitude is linked to a dispositional pluralism about membership and engagement – a tendency to live life across multiple spheres, none of them total or all-embracing. The propensity to withdraw, to hold oneself slightly aloof, thus becomes natural; the ability to do so becomes valuable, both in directly engaging in politics (in which this propensity encourages the sustaining of distanced, balanced judgment stressed by Weber and Niebuhr), and in navigating the complex demands and irritants of social life. The pluralist will thus recognize the value of being “left alone” – even if she (sometimes, or even often) chooses a life of passionate commitment and ardent membership.<sup>815</sup>

This element of detachment, critical distance, capacity for withdrawal and inclination to be left alone may seem to encourage a passive or apathetic approach to politics – something of which Berlin has been accused, though he denied favoring such a stance.<sup>816</sup> There are two

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<sup>814</sup> Cf. Macedo, 238-9; Crowder, 195-6, 198-9, 207-11.

<sup>815</sup> Cf. Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism: Romanticism and the Reconstruction of Liberal Thought* (Harvard University Press, 1987), 59-100, 103-51; Amos Oz, *How to Cure a Fanatic* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 68-70; Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* (Penguin, 1996). There are costs to the emergence of such proclivities and characters – the anomie, disconnection, and shallowness of which “communitarian” critics of “modernity” have made us aware. Without denying or dismissing these real costs and dangers, I want to follow the authors cited in pointing to the compensating value and promise of a pluralistic-individualistic *habitus*.

<sup>816</sup> See Berlin to Bernard Crick, 29 March 1966: “my free men are not self-isolated, lonely exiles and hermits,

resources for resistance to apathy and withdrawal within Berlin's thought – one internal to pluralism itself, the other supplementary to it. First, to internalize pluralism is not only to cultivate a particular way of thinking about politics (and life), and thus certain dispositions and preferences for political action; it is also to recognize that other, very different, ways of being and thinking also have value (even if they carry with them certain dangers, and are less true to human moral reality). The pluralist, whose outlook militates against a passionate, all-consuming commitment to one ideal or project, will nevertheless recognize both the intrinsic nobility of such commitment – and the need, in certain circumstances, for a character marked by passionate, whole-hearted commitment, in order to sustain the humane habits of mind and institutions that make the preservation of human values, in all their plurality, possible.<sup>817</sup> This allows the pluralist to recognize what non-pluralists cannot – that both a pluralistic political temper, and very non-pluralistic ones, have their place and their virtues. The fox knows many things, including the virtues of the hedgehog, but not vice-versa.

This seems to save the pluralist from wholly embracing an ethos of detachment by preventing her from wholly embracing *any* ethos. If this is the case, it would seem that pluralism is too open-ended to be action-guiding at all. This is true, to an extent. Pluralism can shape and guide action, but only as one element in a larger moral outlook. In Berlin's case, it was combined, not only with a humility about knowledge and opposition to simplification, but with

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fleeing from the all-devouring monster State. They just need and get elbow-room, and now and then ask themselves which of several open avenues to walk, but normally they participate in the *polis* fully. And they vote to suppress the freedom of enemies of freedom, but with a qualm or two." (*Building*, 274-5).

<sup>817</sup> Thus, Berlin recognized both the tension between, and the advantages of, the "dynamism and falsifying influence of passionate, one-sided faith" on the one hand, and "the clear-eyed sense of the complex facts and inevitable weakness in action which flows from enlightened skepticism" on the other ("Tolstoy and Enlightenment", 298).

the positive ethical outlook of “humanism” – of which Herzen was representative.

Berlin's “humanism” involved three distinct, but related, elements. The first is recognition<sup>818</sup> of “actual individuals, in specific times and places” as being of paramount value, above abstract principles and institutions, which exist to serve human beings, and not *vice versa*:

all that is ultimately valuable are the particular purposes of particular persons; and to trample on these is always a crime because there is, and can be, no principle or value higher than the ends of the individual, and therefore no principle in the name of which one could be permitted to do violence to or degrade or destroy individuals – the sole authors of all principles and all values.<sup>819</sup>

The humanist conception of the value and moral claims of human beings had two different facets, which we might term the “humanitarian” and the “romantic”. The first consists in a concern to reduce human suffering<sup>820</sup>; the second is concerned with promoting “free human personalities”, marked by variety and independence, and the potential for novelty and distinction – against uniformity and mediocrity.<sup>821</sup> Berlin did not consistently assign any precise weight or general priority to either – and each one acted as a break on a potentially excessive concern for the other. Nevertheless, his was a distinctively defensive or prophylactic, rather than perfectionist, humanism, which held that the justification of all movements “that one can respect ... does not lie in these maximal programmes, but in the fact that they wish to right an

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<sup>818</sup> Such “recognition” involves perceiving a postulate (in this case, the paramount value of human beings) to be true, *and* internalizing this perception, so that it shapes both one's other perceptions (both one's experience, and one's reflection on experience), and one's deliberation about conduct – the alternative courses one recognizes as possibilities, and one's evaluations of these courses.

<sup>819</sup> HBIL, 128; see also *ibid.*, 117-18.

<sup>820</sup> See “The Pursuit of the Ideal”, 17- 18.

<sup>821</sup> For Berlin's invocation of the idea of the (free) human (or individual) personality see HBIL, 108; “Vissarion Belinsky”, 192, 195, 196; “Tolstoy and Enlightenment”, 292.



intolerable wrong, and staunch a wound that destroys the life of those who are afflicted by it.”<sup>822</sup>

“Humanism” is, secondly, empiricist and this-worldly, holding that the purpose of life was “life itself, the purpose of the struggle for liberty is the liberty here, today, of living individuals, each with his own individual ends” – ends which they themselves identified or defined.<sup>823</sup> This is tied to a particular conception of time, one oriented toward the present and immediate future rather than a “long-term” perspective: “In the long run all kinds of things are possible, but it is in the short run that people suffer and die”; and therefore to ignore the short-run in favor of, or treat it as subordinate to, the long-run was morally callous and blind.<sup>824</sup>

Third, humanism prizes and promotes a capacity for “humanity” – understood as empathetic insight into, respect for the moral worth and dignity of, and motivating concern for, other human beings – as a guide to moral deliberation. “Humanity” is what allows us to recognize another human being as similar to us in crucial ways, and as having claims on us; and, beyond this, to feel concern for her well-being. The sense of humanity is what was awakened in Orwell when, serving in a Republican militia unit during the Spanish Civil War, he saw a Nationalist soldier trying to keep his trousers up as he ran;<sup>825</sup> it is what was awakened in the

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<sup>822</sup> To Noam Chomsky, 18 December 1969, *Building* 405. This reading runs contrary to that of George Kateb, who sees Berlin's humanism as purely, and dangerously, romantic (“Can Cultures be Judged? Two Defenses of Cultural Pluralism in Isaiah Berlin's Work”, reprinted in Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* [Yale University Press, 2006], 361-382). The humanism that Berlin actually subscribed to was much closer to Kateb's own position – though it emphasizes tensions and tragic conflicts between elements that Kateb is more apt to present as harmonious, and to assign value to facets of human life the value of which Kateb denies.

<sup>823</sup> HBIL 107. Cf. *A Mind and its Time*, chapter 8, for the centrality of this theme in Berlin's account of freedom.

<sup>824</sup> Berlin to Robert Silvers, 19 March 1970, *Building* 418.

<sup>825</sup> As Orwell later wrote, “I did not shoot [at the Nationalist soldier] partly because of that detail about the trousers. I had come here to shoot at 'Fascists'; but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a 'Fascist', he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself, and you don't feel like shooting at him.” Orwell, “Looking Back on the Spanish War” (1943), in Orwell, *Facing Unpleasant Facts: Narrative Essays*, ed. George Packer (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 149.

young Berlin when he saw the tsarist policeman being dragged off by the mob. And it is what failed to awaken in Communist jailers and Nazi execution squads as they went about coldly eliminating those they regarded as enemies and vermin.<sup>826</sup>

This is to put matters in stark terms (not inappropriately, given the circumstances of twentieth century politics). But Berlin's defense of humanism was also directed against milder failures of humanity in the political realm, such as tutelary paternalism, or a cost-benefit analysis approach to governance.<sup>827</sup> His emphasis on empathy was also directed against the scientistic, ethically neutral approach that he found overtaking the social sciences. Berlin thus advocated not only ethical humanism, but also what one might call “perspectival” and “methodological” humanism – an orientation concerned with and sensitive to matters of personal character, temperament, and outlook.<sup>828</sup> For Berlin, this perspectival humanism was linked to ethical humanism – and to a characteristically liberal outlook.<sup>829</sup> And a capacity for humanity was both a basis *and* a goal of liberal politics, which should aim not only at preventing human beings from “attempting to exterminate one another”, but also, “so far as possible ... to promote the maximum practicable degree of sympathy and understanding, never likely to be complete,

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<sup>826</sup> Cf. Glover, *Humanity* .

<sup>827</sup> E.g. Berlin's attack on “the calm moral arithmetic of cost-effectiveness which liberates decent men from qualms, because they no longer think of the entities to which they apply their scientific computations as actual human beings who live the lives and suffer the deaths of concrete individuals” – an outlook which he found “typical of the Establishment” in his day (“Fathers and Children”, 346).

<sup>828</sup> See “Historical Inevitability”, 94-165; “The Sense of Reality”, 1-39; “The Concept of Scientific History”, *Concepts and Categories* 103-42; *Vico and Herder* (Viking, 1976).

<sup>829</sup> See e.g. “Fathers and Children”, 340: “Turgenev, and liberals generally” saw political attitudes and tendencies as “functions of human beings, not human beings as functions of social tendencies”.

between them.”<sup>830</sup>

Berlin's vision of liberalism was also tied to his “humanism” in his commitment to the value or personal quality of *decency*. Decency involves both compassion and concern for others, and an instinctive respect for certain limits in one's conduct. Decency is expressed primarily through personal behavior; but it was also linked to a particular political impulse, of minimalistic, negative humanitarianism – the view that political action and policy should aim at promoting a situation in which there is “the least degree of injustice”, the “least suffering, least humiliation, least misery and squalor.” Starting from the goal of minimizing human suffering and evils offered, at least, a tentative criterion for guiding conduct.<sup>831</sup>

If pluralism is allied to humanism, neither doctrinaire and inflexible commitment (which would “bear down too cruelly on actual human beings in actual situations too often”<sup>832</sup>) *nor* a passive withdrawal (which fails to adequately respond to the claims of others) appears an adequate response to the demands of conflicting values and the challenge of political conflict. Instead, a pluralistic recognition of the value of different political temperaments and tactics may foster an appreciation for the importance of circumstance, and of situated practical judgment. Whether a “normal” (moderate, pacific, pluralistic) political disposition, or a more militant attitude, is desirable will depend on circumstances. In some cases, the best thing for a pluralist to do is to step aside to make way for others whose tempers are better-suited to the political task of the day or moment – while remaining on-hand to offer cautions, lest such commitment and

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<sup>830</sup> “The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West”, 47.

<sup>831</sup> To Noam Chomsky, 18 December 1969, *Building* 405; to Omar Haliq, 17 April 1972, *Building* 488.

<sup>832</sup> To Elliston, op. cit., *Enlightening* 350.

resolution foster one-sidedness, and its attendant intolerance, haste, and blindness. Pluralism thus valorizes the virtue of engaged *flexibility* – a capacity and tendency to respond to different situations of choice or evaluation without relying on or trying to impose a general rule or formula. Dispositional flexibility allows one to revise previous commitments and judgments, and to weigh considerations differently in response to the apparent demands of different cases. Life should be approached not as a rigid plan, but as a course one must navigate – and which one can learn from and enjoy – as one goes along: “one must judge each situation, so far as possible, on its own merits & not commit oneself to campaigns for general principles: only for liberation from specific wrongs & then for liberation from the defects of the remedy, & so on”.<sup>833</sup>

To be skeptical, ironic,<sup>834</sup> and attuned to the complexity of moral life, and nevertheless dedicated to humanistic values and animated by a sense of decency and humanity, was to tread an uncertain, often unclear and unsteady path through the political world of the twentieth century – or through any political world we know. If moderation is cold comfort, and decency not enough, the combination nevertheless remains important – particularly in the face of extremism and the suffering it causes.

There remains one further problem, or at least tension, in Berlin's thought as I have reconstructed it. Central as, on my view, the articulation and prescription of a certain ethos was to Berlin's work, this reading of Berlin points to a certain problem. Liberals, on what I take to have been Berlin's view, must be concerned with questions of moral character and development

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<sup>833</sup> To Myron Gilmore, op. cit., *Enlightening* 152. Cf. Crowder, 191-2, 199-200; Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 370; Charles Larmore, “The Idea of a Life Plan”, *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 16:1 (Winter 1999), 96-112.

<sup>834</sup> Berlinian, or pluralist, irony is a matter of recognizing, and holding in view, both the claims of particular values or ideals, and their partial nature; it means, in practice, an ability to be dedicated to ideals, while also entertaining reservations about, and being open to recognizing limits to, them.

– but must also refrain from programs of moral indoctrination, out of respect for human freedom; for “men are made human by their capacity for choice – choice of evil and good equally”; “freedom to choose and to experiment” is what “distinguishes men from the rest of nature”.<sup>835</sup> And not only should liberals be wary of programs of ideological indoctrination or the imposition of a model of character; liberals who are also pluralists should refrain from seeking to foster, through *any* means, uniformity of character, because there is real ethical merit to a variety of different personal dispositions, ideals, and ways of living. There is value in variety and untidiness, in the existence of “the widest variety of human life and character”, of “diversity, versatility fullness of life”, as against “narrowness” and “uniformity”.<sup>836</sup> Therefore, a reduction of personal variety would involve a genuine ethical loss. And Berlin's stress on the dangers that arise when means are antithetical to the ends at which they aim should make us all the more wary of attempts to use coercion or enforce tutelage to foster the development of “liberal” types of character: the formation of characters appropriate to a society marked by freedom and variety may well require the free and various formation of character. Berlin's particular understanding of liberalism, then, would seem to point both to the connection of liberalism to – or even its reliance upon – particular types of character, outlook, and spirit; and to suggest that liberals should neither enforce, nor promote, nor even hope for the prevalence of the types of character, outlook, and spirit which they have good reason to embrace.

One solution to this impasse – imperfect, as all solutions are – is to embrace Tolstoy's

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<sup>835</sup> “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life”, 237, 251. The way in which liberalism both relies upon, or demands, certain dispositions of character, while also rejecting character-formation as a political program – is stated, with characteristic sharpness, by Shklar in “The Liberalism of Fear”, 15 .

<sup>836</sup> “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life”, 221, 228-9, 242.

conviction that true education – *bildung*, the development of free, self-directing individuals – could only be brought about through “precept ... the example of our own lives. Thus, against attempts to mold character and impose belief by force, Tolstoy favored a pedagogic mode of *exemplification*.”<sup>837</sup> Berlin's own pluralism inhibited him from proposing a programmatic picture of a single good life or ideal of character; but through evoking others, he was able to display a variety of good, and bad, ways of living, thinking, and engaging in politics. Berlin's “exemplary” method – his technique of moral-intellectual portraiture – was most likely a spontaneous expression of his personal inclinations, rather than an intentional choice based on liberal commitments. But it was also in keeping with both his recognition of the importance of ethos to deciding the course and quality of individual action and political life, and his understanding of the particular difficulties of liberalism. A focus on ethos, and method of “exemplification”, both in his depiction of others and his cultivation of a particular intellectual and authorial self, thus constitute one of Berlin's most significant contributions as a liberal political educator. While Berlin's writings have much to say about the moral psychology, and ethical phenomenology, of both liberal humanism and its antagonists, he also provides an example in the way in which he (largely) kept his head, without becoming heartless.

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<sup>837</sup> “Tolstoy and Enlightenment”, 296, emphasis added.

**Chapter 6. Neither Angel Nor Maggot:**  
**Adam Michnik and Oppositional Liberalism**

*“So be pious and humble, you proud intellectual, but do not renounce skepticism, at least not in the world of political involvement ... Bring the clear simplicity of the commands of the Gospel (where yes means yes and no means no) into the world of unstable moral norms, but fill the bland world of officially codified values with the laughter of the jester and the doubts of the skeptic. For your destiny does not lie in celebrating political victories or flattering your own nation. You are to remain faithful to lost causes, to speak unpleasant truths, and to arouse opposition.”<sup>838</sup>*

The foregoing chapters have presented a picture of liberalism defensive, and anti-liberalism insurgent (sometimes triumphantly so). The anti-liberals have been revolutionaries, pursuing power, and practicing a politics of transformation. The liberals have been writing in societies threatened or tempted by anti-liberal rule – but societies in which liberalism, while fragile or beleaguered, nevertheless is a mainstream position and a political reality (however incomplete or compromised). At most, anti-liberal rule has presented itself as a reality that is elsewhere, temporally or spatially – a memory of the recent past, a threat in the future, a menacing alternative or rival.

But how does the picture look where liberal democracy itself seems a distant, even utopian goal, where it is those committed to liberal values, principles, and institutions who nurse transformative ambitions? In such a situation, a spirit of moral fanaticism, an ideal of personal purity that disdains the compromises required by political responsibility, and a ruthless drive for social transformation at any cost, come to be temptations for those radical political non-conformists who embrace liberal ideals. And the temptations of a Manichean model of politics are all the greater in circumstances where there is no institutional possibility for legitimate

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Adam Michnik, *Letters from Freedom* [cited as LF], trans. Jane Cave, ed. Irena Grudzinska Gross (University of California Press, 1998), 94-5. Unless otherwise noted, all citations are to works by Michnik.

oppositional politics, where the opponents liberals face are all-powerful, and seem genuinely evil; while purity of purpose and heroic courage are the necessary psychological conditions for undertaking resistance.

The problem of how to reconcile adherence to liberal principles with commitment to transformative political action is not, to be sure, restricted to drastically illiberal societies. It has occurred frequently, in considerably different forms. Some of the most complicated and troubling cases have arisen where liberals have found themselves in a society that is liberal in some facets of its public life, and deeply illiberal in others. But here I focus on a situation in which the opposition between liberalism and anti-liberalism was more clear-cut, and in which liberals found themselves *both* struggling against opponents who employed some of the same arguments, and adhered to some of the same presuppositions, as the anti-liberals with whom we have been concerned – *and* felt the pull of the absolutist spirit. This is the situation of oppositionists living under Communist regimes in the USSR and its satellites. Seeking not to defend liberalism but to achieve it, they faced the main problems encountered by other liberals responding to anti-liberalism – how to remain true to a liberal vision of politics and of political ethics without condemning themselves to an irresponsible political impotence, and how to combat anti-liberalism without falling prey to its vices – in a different way, one which forced them (and allows us, through their example) to grapple with the ethical and political dangers of transformative idealism *from within*.

A study of the ethical views and ethos of liberal oppositionists also allows us to confront an accusation that has been hanging over the discussion so far: that the liberal ethos I have been tracing forms part of an ideology of conservatism – that it is suited to or encourages a defense of



the status quo, by foreclosing commitment to radical political programs. If – as I hope to show – many of the same ethical arguments were taken up, and many of the same dispositions, values, and sensibilities were cultivated and exercised by men and women who pursued (and achieved) far-reaching social change, this suggests that the identification of the ethos and arguments of “tempered liberalism” with reflexive defense of (or deference to) the *status quo* is, to say the least, too simple.

The account that follows thus seeks both to demonstrate the continuities between the defensive liberalism in the post-war West, and oppositionist liberalism in the post-1968 East; and to bring out elements of the latter that may provide inspiration and guidance to those contemporary liberals who wish to combine commitment to liberalism with a more activist pursuit of social change. Among both the continuities and the potential sources of inspiration is the tendency of (at least some) oppositionists to respond to the ethical and political challenges they faced by presenting “a different view of the world, a different life style” – an ethos.<sup>839</sup>

While I have thus far been writing of the opposition in general, my discussion – in keeping with the format of previous chapters – focuses on a single figure: Adam Michnik, one of the most important theoreticians, strategists, and publicists of the Polish opposition from the mid-1970s to the (negotiated) fall of Communism in 1989, and thereafter one of democratic Poland's most prominent public intellectuals. Widely translated, Michnik's writings provide a lively and perceptive entry into the problems and responses of the oppositionist movement. Through the vicissitudes of the oppositionist movement – its tribulations and its eventual triumph – Michnik maintained a clear-sighted and bold, careful and nuanced appreciation of the

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<sup>839</sup> Jerzy Szacki, *Liberalism After Communism*, 77.

importance and dangers of the different elements of the dissident ethos – personal conscience and social solidarity, commitment to compromise and unbending integrity, pragmatism and honor, idealism and irony. He provides a model of how to think and act as a political idealist without illusions, a fighter without fanaticism, a realist without corruption, and a moderate without complacency.<sup>840</sup>

Michnik's contribution to the opposition was twofold: he helped to formulate a political strategy, and articulated a vision of character and code of conduct. Both of these activities were attempts to answer what was, for Michnik, the crucial question: “*How* should this struggle [for human rights] be conducted?”<sup>841</sup> This led Michnik to a concern with questions of ethos. For Michnik, the “concept of 'ethos' is something distinct from ideology and political programs”, as well as philosophical propositions: it is a “moral and philosophical worldview”, as expressed in how one chooses to conduct oneself in one's actions and interactions with others.<sup>842</sup> Inculcating an ethos demanded not just advocacy, but exemplification, of certain qualities of mind or self,

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<sup>840</sup> Michnik's writings – and the theoretical contributions and practical activity of Eastern- and Central-European dissidents more generally – have been appropriated and critiqued by Western political theorists mainly as expressions of the idea and practice of a democratic “civil society”. See e.g. Jacques Rupnik, “Dissent in Poland 1968-78: The End of Revisionism and the Rebirth of Civil Society”, in Rudolf L. Tokles, ed. *Opposition in Eastern Europe* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 60-112; Zbigniew Rau, ed. *The Reemergence of Civil Society in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Westview Press, 1991); Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (The Free Press, 1992); Bronislaw Geremek, “Civil Society Then and Now”, *Journal of Democracy* 3:2 (1992), 3-12; Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (MIT Press, 1994); Arato, *From Neo-Marxism to Democratic Theory: Essays on the Critical Theory of Soviet-Type Societies* (M. E. Sharpe, 1993); Tismaneanu, ed. *The Revolutions of 1989* (Routledge, 1999); Gideon Baker, *Civil Society and Democratic Theory: Alternative Voices* (Routledge, 2002); Barbara J. Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe: Citizen-Intellectual and Philosopher Kings* (Central European University Press, 2003). An exception to this general pattern, which reads Michnik in relation to questions of political ethics, is Alexander S. Kirshner, *A Theory of Militant Democracy: The Ethics of Combating Political Extremism* (Yale University Press, 2014), 26-59. The “civil society” and “ethical” themes are brought together in Jeffrey C. Isaac, “Civil Society and the Spirit of Revolt”, *Dissent* Summer 1993, 356-61.

<sup>841</sup> Michnik, *Letters from Prison* [LP], trans. Maya Litinski (University of California Press, 1987), 53, emphasis added.

<sup>842</sup> *The Church and the Left*, trans. David Ost (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 211; see also *ibid* 181.

certain patterns of thought and feeling, as revealed both in practical action, and in the manner of speech and writing.

A central thesis of Michnik's conception of politics is that the quality of one's conduct and underlying character can crucially determine the outcome of political struggles. In order to create a new political order, characterized by a new sort of political ethos, Michnik and his comrades had to exhibit the sort of conduct that would be appropriate to the sort of politics they were trying, ultimately, to create.<sup>843</sup> Accordingly, Michnik's central maxim of political conduct under Communism was to act “as if” one were already living in the sort of society one was seeking to bring about – to “start doing the things you think should be done, and to start being what you think society should become. Do you believe in freedom of speech? Then speak freely. Do you love the truth? Then tell it. Do you believe in an open society? Then act in the open. Do you believe in a decent and humane society? Then behave decently and humanely”.<sup>844</sup> Or, as Michnik himself wrote, “Every act of defiance helps us build the framework of democratic socialism, which should not be merely or primarily a legal institutional structure but a real, day-to-day community of free people.”<sup>845</sup>

The connection between Michnik's articulation and enactment of an ethic and ethos of liberal politics is illustrated in a particularly dramatic incident from May 1981 – during the first,

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<sup>843</sup> This project is reflected in Michnik's characterization of the contributions made by KOR (Workers' Defense Committee, which Michnik helped organize in the 1970s); in addition to offering legal and financial support to workers and their families, KOR provided “a certain model of political reflection within a totalitarian system, a certain model of civil courage, and the edification of independent institutions in a civil society”. LF, 59.

<sup>844</sup> Jonathan Schell “Introduction”, LP xxx.

<sup>845</sup> LP 148.

short-lived<sup>846</sup> stirrings of public freedom in Poland. Police in Otwock, a town fifteen miles to the south-east of Warsaw, detained, and brutally beat, two people. This prompted an angry mob to form outside of the police station; they wanted to lynch a police corporal who had taken part in the beating, and burn down the station (with a number of policemen inside). Local activists called in representatives of Solidarity to calm the situation, which they did with some success – but the crowd still sought to burn down the station. Michnik arrived on the scene, and introduced himself to the wary crowd – who knew his byline but not his face – with the words “My name is Adam Michnik. I am an antisocialist force.” Michnik was able to convince the crowd to disperse: while the (by then empty) police station was torched the next day, the police corporal and his colleagues escaped unharmed.<sup>847</sup>

This rescue of Communist policemen from an enraged lynch-mob echoes the young Isaiah Berlin's witnessing another representative of an oppressive order being dragged off to probable lynching by another angry mob, in Petrograd 64 years earlier.<sup>848</sup> Berlin's experience, as a passive child, left him with a hatred of violence, a sympathy for the flailing individual victim in the crowd, that immunized him to the romance of revolutionary politics and shaped his ethical outlook throughout his life. Now Michnik, inspired by the same opposition to violence, vengeance and hatred that guided Berlin was determined to see that history did not repeat itself – both in the particular incident of a policeman's lynching, and in the larger process of a revolution

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<sup>846</sup> Lasting from the emergence of the Solidarity free trades union in August 1980, to the declaration of martial law in December 1981.

<sup>847</sup> Jan Jozef Lipski, *KOR: The History of the Workers' Defense Committee in Poland, 1976-1981* (University of California Press, 1985), 448-50.

<sup>848</sup> Obviously, this incident was not on Michnik's mind; but a set of similar cases – of participants in the noble 1956 Hungarian revolution lynching functionaries of the security police – was. See LP 87.

being perverted into a tyranny. He succeeded on both counts.

**A. Michnik and the Principles of Oppositional Liberalism**

Michnik's life, outlook, and career as a dissident were the product of a country which was, in many ways, aberrant within the Soviet bloc. There was more freedom to travel, and a more independent parliament, which included non-Party delegates. The country was heavily agricultural, and agriculture had never been collectivized; agricultural workers remained more peasant than proletarian – and more independent of the state. There was also a strong sense of national history, centered on tales of patriotic insurrection and conspiracy, and deeply interwoven with the traditions of the Catholic Church – which retained unusual strength and independence within Polish society. The Party thus found it harder to control the story of the national past.<sup>849</sup>

Yet Poland was also ruled by an overwhelming police authority. This produced a “police view of life”, according to which everything that happened, happened because the police allowed or engineered its happening. This impression (which was actively fostered by the police themselves) was the result of the absence of any countervailing forces to check police authority (such as an independent judiciary or a free press); even the government could find itself captive to the police.<sup>850</sup> And so the yearning for the traditional centerpieces of liberal politics – an expansion of personal liberty through the proclamation of individual rights, and the preservation of those rights against arbitrary and overbearing government power through both internal and external restraints on government – was also the animating aspiration of the Polish opposition.

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<sup>849</sup> See Michael T. Kaufman, *Mad Dreams, Saving Graces: Poland: A Nation in Conspiracy* (New York: Random House, 1989) passim, and especially 101-2.

<sup>850</sup> Ibid., 38-9.

Michnik was born to a family of partly Jewish descent. But the “religion” in which he was brought up was not Judaism, but Marxism. Before World War II Michnik's father had been jailed for activism on behalf of the Communist Party of Western Ukraine, and subsequently – after the War – helped edit the authorized Polish edition of Marx and Engels.<sup>851</sup> The young Michnik's criticisms of Communist reality had its roots in Communist ideals: “I believed that a Communist was someone whose mission was to denounce injustice. So I did.”<sup>852</sup>

Disillusionment came in 1968, with the invasion of Czechoslovakia and anti-Semitic campaigns against revisionist Marxists in Poland. Michnik realized that “[t]he system that proclaimed freedom attacked defenseless students with inspired goons and vigilantes. The system that proclaimed liberty sent tanks into Czechoslovakia. The system that hung its slogans of universal brotherhood unleashed the most disgusting anti-Semitic campaign in Poland, the first in postwar Europe.”<sup>853</sup> But, even after disillusionment with official Marxism, Michnik and other oppositionists remained true to its Marxist roots in being tied to the cause of the workers: the opposition was a revolt of the people against the “people's republic”, of the workers against the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>854</sup>

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<sup>851</sup> “Adam Michnik”, *Current Biography Yearbook 1990*, ed. Charles Moritz et. al. (New York:H.W. Wilson Company,1990), 436. As Michnik noted he “never caught up with” his father, who had been tortured while in prison; Michnik was only “punched in the face” a few times during his many detentions. LF 263.

<sup>852</sup> LF 30.

<sup>853</sup> Michnik quoted in Kaufman, “Poland's Plucky Activist”.

<sup>854</sup> See e.g. LF 267. On social-democratic elements in the opposition, see Roman Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity* (Princeton University Press, 1991), especially 155-68; Jeffrey Goldfarb, *Beyond Glasnost: The Post-Totalitarian Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially at 126; Alain Touraine et.al., *Solidarity: The Analysis of a Social Movement, Poland 1980-81* (Cambridge University Press, 1983). On the continuation of a social-democratic concern for distributive justice and workers' rights after the fall of Communism, see Timothy Garton Ash, *History of the Present* (Vintage, 2001); 31; Goldfarb, *After the Fall: The Pursuit of Democracy in Central Europe* (Basic Books, 1993), 29-33, 60.

Given his residual debts to Marxism, his admiration for Hannah Arendt, and his labeling of his politics as “democratic”, some would dispute the classification of Michnik as a liberal.<sup>855</sup> But Michnik has embraced what he has himself identified as a characteristically liberal political outlook. Liberalism, for Michnik, is marked by a commitment to personal liberties,<sup>856</sup> parliamentarianism, cultural and political pluralism, tolerance, freedom from ideological dictatorship. It was founded on the perception that the world is marked by conflicts between genuine values, and is thus “imperfect in both its nature and destiny” (note here the echoing of Berlin's substance, and Niebuhr's turn of phrase).<sup>857</sup> In addition to a recognition of ethical pluralism, liberalism was committed to institutional or sociological pluralism – to a political and social order based on a “separation of realms.”<sup>858</sup> And liberalism was committed to sustaining a public realm marked by “pluralism of opinion” – a “dialog”, rather than a public “monologue”.<sup>859</sup> Above all, liberalism was committed to the philosophy and practice of human rights – the view that each human being is “not the property of the state”, but possesses, by virtue of his or her humanity, “innate rights that no state may usurp.”<sup>860</sup> This affirmation of the fundamental rights of the humiliated, imprisoned, fearful individual, which had been the primary goal of liberalism throughout its history, was also the *raison d'etre* of the opposition movement,

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<sup>855</sup> See for instance Szacki, 75.; Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 334-48.

<sup>856</sup> See e.g. *The Church and the Left*, 143-4.

<sup>857</sup> “The Presence of Liberal Values”, *East European Reporter* 4 (Spring/Summer 1991), 70..

<sup>858</sup> Ost, “Introduction”, *The Church and the Left*, 9; cf Walzer, “Liberalism and the Art of Separation”.

<sup>859</sup> *The Trouble with History: Morality, Revolution, and Counter-Revolution*, trans. Elzbieta Matynia, Agnieszka Marczyk and Roman Czarny, ed. Irena Grudzinska-Gross (Yale University Press, 2014), 35-6.

<sup>860</sup> *The Church and the Left*, 50.

which was defined and unified by its commitment to human rights.<sup>861</sup> The “main inspiration” of this liberalism – as for that of Niebuhr and Berlin – was an “anti-totalitarian” impulse. As an oppositionist, he regarded “the attitude toward totalitarian movements and systems” as “the acid test for institutions political parties, and human behavior throughout the world.” Totalitarianism lurked wherever “basic human rights are trampled upon and people are beaten down and oppressed in the name of higher ideals, religious or secular.”<sup>862</sup> Against this, Michnik spoke for “the malcontents from the sects of the eternally unsatisfied and afraid”, who dream of the “patchwork of compromise and good sense” represented by liberal democracy.<sup>863</sup>

As for his self-characterization as a “democrat”, Michnik usually defines democracy to make it largely identical with the ethical and institutional pluralism, and the commitment to protecting rights of personal inviolability, privacy, freedom of speech, and inquiry, which defined liberalism.<sup>864</sup> Where he has identified democracy with majority rule – and thus, more sharply distinguished it from liberalism – he has clearly affirmed his commitment to liberalism over democracy.<sup>865</sup> It is therefore better to talk of the political system invoked by Michnik as liberal-democracy (or, in the term that Michnik re-appropriated from the anti-liberals of the

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<sup>861</sup> See e.g. *ibid* 115-16, 118, 145, 182; LP 55, 107-8; LF 143, 267

<sup>862</sup> *The Church and the Left*, 238, 192; see also *ibid* 51; LF 322.

<sup>863</sup> *The Trouble with History*, 98.

<sup>864</sup> *The Church and the Left*, 36-7; see also LF 105.

<sup>865</sup> See *The Church and the Left*, 139. More recently Michnik has denounced the idea of “sovereign democracy”, advanced by elected autocrats such as Vladimir Putin, which asserts, in the name of democratic national sovereignty, the legitimacy of violations of political and individual liberties. See Matthew Kaminski, “The Weekend Interview: From Solidarity to Democracy”; *The Wall Street Journal* Nov 6, 2009, accessed at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704795604574519463075074956.html>



interwar period, “demo-liberalism”<sup>866</sup>). The main thrust of Michnik's argument about political ends was that the traditional ideals of “the Left” – of democrats and socialists – should be seen as pointing toward liberalism. Within the particular context of a society under totalitarianism, the “struggle for leftist principles” consisted “first and foremost [of] the struggle for freedom and human rights. Without freedom, all grand projects of social reform are either lofty-sounding utopias or masks for totalitarianism.”<sup>867</sup> Liberalism was not something distinct from, much less opposed to, the principles and program of “the Left”: it constituted a strand within the Left's moral DNA, and in the face of totalitarianism any distinction between liberalism and the Left became insignificant.

In sum: the goals and principles that have defined Michnik's political program are all central hallmarks of liberalism. His commitment to these principles has shaped his views on how to pursue them; so too has his familiarity with and understanding of the forces of anti-liberalism.

### **B. The Vices of Virtue: Political Ethics, Political Prophylactics, and the Critique of “Ultrism”**

Liberal in its ideological content, Michnik's thought is *practical* in its orientation. He has always been spurred to write by the itch to get involved in the course of events, and has shaped his writings to address the conditions of the moment. His approach is also heavily *historical*, evoking Poland's past as a means to reflecting on the moral choices of politics.<sup>868</sup> This reflects a particular conception of the nature of history. On the one hand, there is a rejection of narratives of inevitability, a defiance of “a certain historiosophy according to which the Spirit of History

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<sup>866</sup> “Gogol's Venom: A Study in Lost Illusions”, *Partisan Review* 67:3 (2000), accessed online at <http://www.bu.edu/partisanreview/archive/2000/3/michnik.html>. See also LF 201, 337.

<sup>867</sup> *The Church and the Left*, 186.

<sup>868</sup> See e.g. LP 248, 325.

proclaimed mercilessly that historical necessity imbued the doings of those who had power”.<sup>869</sup> But history is no meaningless succession of events. The study of history is an effective means of political education because the course of history repeats itself. Although events are never identical, the central features of human moral experience remain familiar: “the world is still full of inquisitors and heretics, liars and those lied to, terrorists and the terrorized. There is still someone dying at Thermopylae, someone drinking a glass of hemlock, someone crossing the Rubicon, someone drawing up a proscription list. And nothing suggests that these things will stop repeating themselves.” Michnik therefore has sought to expose errors in political and moral thinking of the past “not so that the language of that reign of terror may never repeat itself, but because I’m convinced it will inevitably do so”.<sup>870</sup> At the same time, it is often easier to see patterns of moral experience more clearly when we are less caught up in them. Turning to events of the past allows us to “overcome emotion and reflect calmly” on recurrent, and thus relevant, tendencies.<sup>871</sup> History is “a teacher of life” in enabling – or forcing – us to confront, and come to better understand, those who are differently situated and thus perceive things differently: it teaches pluralism, a recognition of the multiplicity of interpretations.<sup>872</sup>

Practical in direction and historical in inspiration, Michnik's approach to political thought is often “prophylactic” in approach: it seeks to identify recurrent dangers inherent in political activity – particularly in that political activity which is most appealing or seems most admirable – above all, the politics of moral witness and moral transformation to which Michnik and his

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<sup>869</sup> Michnik quoted in Elzbieta Matynia, *Performative Democracy* (Paradigm Publishers, 2009), 65.

<sup>870</sup> “The Ultras of Moral Revolution” [cited as “Ultras”], trans. Elzbieta Matynia, *Daedalus* Winter 2007, 68.

<sup>871</sup> LP 176

<sup>872</sup> *The Trouble with History*, 46, 48-9.

fellow oppositionists were drawn. Michnik's thinking about proto-democratic and democratic politics has accordingly been shaped by his analysis of the dangers and pathologies that regularly afflict revolutionary or transformative politics. The opposition, inspired by hope, must nevertheless strive to be a “party of memory”;<sup>873</sup> the “experience of being corrupted by terror must be imprinted on the consciousness of everyone who belongs to a freedom movement. Otherwise, as Simone Weill wrote, freedom will again become a refugee from the camp of the victors.”<sup>874</sup> Even before the fall of Communism, and especially since, Michnik's thought has been both shadowed and galvanized by awareness of the ironic tragedy of the history of revolution: the way in which “the fight for freedom turned into a ruthless drive for power and merciless revenge ... Freedom, equality, and fraternity changed into their opposites: terror, enslavement, and cruelty.” He has, accordingly, devoted much of his writing, not to attacking Communism, but to warning against “anti-communism with a Bolshevik face”.<sup>875</sup> Michnik is justly known as a fighter against Communism; but here I am particularly interested in the way in which he turned the lessons he learned from observing the moral perversions of Communism to analyzing the temptations and failings besetting his own, anti-Communist side. For Michnik, the Jacobins or Bolsheviks are not only “them”, but also, potentially, “us”.

What Michnik has termed the “ultra” approach to politics has four main elements. The first is fundamentalism. This consists, first, in *normative monism* – the belief that there is (and that, to think rightly about politics about morality, one must identify) some “one thing needful”,

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<sup>873</sup> Cf. Emerson, “The Conservative”, cited in Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear”, 8.

<sup>874</sup> LP 86-8.

<sup>875</sup> Michnik, *The Trouble with History*, 160, 32.

and that all other considerations should be subordinated to the one primary goal or imperative. Pluralism, compromise, ambivalence or uncertainty about priorities appear tantamount to “abandonment of moral principles.”<sup>876</sup> Secondly, fundamentalism involves the conviction that one *knows* what is most important, what must be done, and how best to do it. Fundamentalists believe that it is possible to “build a world without sin; and that this can only happen if the state is governed by sinless individuals who are equipped with the doctrine of the one and only correct project for organizing human relations”.<sup>877</sup>

We may label the second component of the “ultra” approach extremism. On the level of *means*, extremists prefer “extreme solutions” – actions marked by refusal to make concessions, to accept limits, to compromise or delay. Concerning *ends*, extremism consists in a tendency to see the alternatives facing the world in stark terms of corruption or redemption, cataclysm or salvation – and to accordingly conceive of the attainment of one's goals in similarly stark, imperative terms, as “moral revolution”, a “cleansing” of society, etc. They strive to “turn the world upside down” – and accept the high costs this involves as not only justified, but an indication that they are doing right.<sup>878</sup>

Extremism and fundamentalism foster ruthless consequentialism in judging and undertaking action. “Ultras”, convinced of the overwhelming importance – or normative necessity – of their ultimate goals, come to disregard all other considerations – of friendship, truthfulness and honor, respect or compassion for individuals – which may come into conflict

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<sup>876</sup> “Ultras”, 72, 74, 82.

<sup>877</sup> *The Trouble With History*, 32.

<sup>878</sup> “Ultras”, 73-4, 67-8. This characterization is reminiscent of Berlin – whose essay on Joseph de Maistre is cited by Michnik in the essay just quoted here.

with service to their ultimate goal. The Jacobins, once in power, became “perfectly indifferent to the fate of individuals who had been victimized or humiliated”, sacrificing them “without scruples in the name of Revolutionary Cleansing”.<sup>879</sup>

The fourth component of the “ultra” approach to politics is “Manicheanism”: the perception of the world in terms of a stark division between good and evil, friends and enemies, heroes and villains – or, in Michnik's terms, morally pure “Angels” and corrupted “Maggots”. This outlook leads to dangerously unjust estimations of both sides of the division. Manicheans tend to assume that those who oppose the side of rightness or righteousness must be either fools or knaves (or both). Manicheanism is thus incompatible with recognition of a reasonable, well-intentioned diversity of opinion; and tends to foster *contempt* and/or *hatred* for those who disagree about either goals, or how to respond to particular challenges. Thus, Manicheans among the anti-Communist opposition came to feel contempt for those “to whom convictions, temperament, or merely fear dictate another life-style and a different way of serving the common cause” than illegal opposition. For the Manichean, the “service of virtue manifested itself in only one way: hatred of the enemies of virtue”. And not just hatred, but moral assassination: for before the Jacobin exterminated his enemy, “he has to dehumanize him, defile him.”<sup>880</sup>

The vilification of opponents is one facet of Manicheanism. The other is the “angelization” of one's own side and self. Michnik worried that the “beautiful but dangerous” “ethos” arising from the “cult of martyrdom, of heroic sacrifice,” would encourage “self-idealization”, leading the revolutionary or dissident to “assign himself special rights”. The

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<sup>879</sup> “Ultras”, 75. Michnik's analysis of Jacobinism here closely follows Hannah Arendt's; cf. Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin, 2006), 49-105.

<sup>880</sup> LP 60; 194; “Ultras”, 73-75.

“angel” is “granted the right to act in this way by his own self-sacrifice and his sacred goal: the radiant future”.<sup>881</sup> Manicheanism thus undermined two crucial components of a liberal political morality and ethics: toleration, and a principle of equal respect and just treatment for all members of society.

The combination of moral extremism – the refusal to accept compromise or limits on the pursuit of morally desirable goals – and a Manichean conviction of their own righteousness made political “angels” dangerous, because it meant that they “had no brakes.” While this inspired “extreme courage”, it also fostered “utter disregard for the safety of other people”, and a sense that one deserved power. This encouraged an embrace of elitism and authoritarianism, of “contempt” for “ordinary people” and arrogance on the part of the ideological elite.

Revolutionaries so frequently became tyrannical because they came to believe that they, and they alone, had a right and a duty to rule over others, who were too sunk in corruption to rule themselves.<sup>882</sup> Thus the Jacobins, regarding themselves as the “guarantors of ... the rule of Freedom and Virtue”, came to pursue and entrench power “without scruples”, while branding any critics as traitors to the Revolution: thus “Freedom and Virtue entered into a marriage with the guillotine” The “drug of revolution” – both the exuberance of power and the terror of enemies – transformed the honest, fastidious Jacobins into “idealists of cruelty and apostles of terror”, “skillful manipulators, cynics of political game, demagogues of fluent speech and dried-up heart”. They were like “people of a religious sect transformed into a gang of bandits”. These “godlike warriors” were “cruel people, hungry for power, armed with hypocrisy” – hypocrisy

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<sup>881</sup> LP 194.

<sup>882</sup> Ibid 195-6.

both in the sense that they used cruelty while professing mercy and sought to advance their own power while professing altruism, and in portraying themselves as the victims even as they massacred others.<sup>883</sup> An obsession with – and assumption of – one's own moral purity, and the moral imperativeness of one's goals, thus leads to corruption, and undermines the good at which political idealists aim.

This analysis, and many of Michnik's conclusions and prescriptions, resemble those of figures such as Berlin and Niebuhr. But, because Michnik was himself a leader in a morally-inspired, radical movement, his analysis and warning against the dangers of “ultra” politics has differed in emphasis from theirs. In particular, he has laid greater stress on the role played in the emergence of political fanaticism by the need for moral self-confidence, and the tendency to be disappointed by others, which often accompany attempts to live a consistently moral life in the face of danger. Michnik combined a call to moral witness in politics with a sharp consciousness of the vices of virtue – of the way in which “the angel who demands heroism not only of himself but of others, who denies the value of compromise, who perceives the world with a Manichean simplicity and despises those who have a different concept of obligations toward other” has, “loving heaven as he may ... already started on the path that leads to hell”; “the angel who is convinced of his angelic character may metamorphose into the devil.”<sup>884</sup>

While Michnik warned against the dangers of fanaticism, his approach to political ethics combined awareness of moral complexity and complicity with its own sort of moral absolutism. This did not involve a claim to absolute virtue on the part of any actor or faction, or the absolute

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<sup>883</sup> “Ultras”., 71-2, 74, 75.

<sup>884</sup> Ibid., 71-2, 74, 75; LP 196-7.

truth of any doctrine. Rather, it took the form of asserting that some means are simply unacceptable. This strand of argument is noble and eloquent, but unsatisfying to the extent that Michnik does not offer a full account of what means are absolutely prohibited, or why they are so prohibited (other than some cursory references to God, which, while rhetorically effective in a Polish context, must be taken with a grain of salt coming from a self-confessed “pagan”).

Michnik's work offers a second, and better developed, line of argument for the wholesale rejection of certain means. This is the suggestion (which we have encountered before) that the use of certain means undermines the ends at which they aim. The use of means of coercion and dishonesty will foster the creation of a dishonest and oppressive society. This is because, first, the sorts of institutions and norms that are likely to grow out of a politics of violence and deception are unlikely to be ones compatible with liberal democracy: “Whoever uses violence to gain power uses violence to maintain power. Whoever is taught to use violence cannot relinquish it.” Second, such means will have deforming effects on the characters and commitments or valuations of those who deploy them: “It often happens ... that the mask on a person's face becomes his face. The instrument used to fulfill values becomes a value in and for itself.” Michnik was conscious of the dangers of trying to beat oppressive and corrupt rulers at their own game: “You learned their language so carefully that you forgot your own; you began to use their rules of the game in everyday life, even with your friends”. He warned his comrades that

If in the struggle against totalitarianism one uses totalitarian methods, one imperceptibly alters the shape of one's cause. In the struggle against a monster, one can become a monster oneself. In such a case, even if one scores a victory, the battle is lost because a kingdom of monsters is created for oneself ... the external thing one fights ruins one internally.

Michnik's greatest fear under Communism was “not of what they will do to us, but of what they



can make us into ... Even the best people can be demoralized by years of persecution and the shock of regaining their lost stature ... I pray that we do not change from prisoners into prison guards.”<sup>885</sup>

A positive corollary to this warning about the corrupting effects of certain means was a belief in the “creative power of actions” – the ability of an individual's or movement's choices and day-to-day (or moment-to-moment) behavior to form both the sorts of character and the political culture which are worth pursuing, thus contributing to the achievement of ends not only through, but *in*, the means used. Michnik's claim to our attention stems not only from his warnings against the pathology of “Ultrism”, but from the positive vision of an ethics and ethos of oppositional politics – and later, of democratic politics – that he drew from these negative lessons.

### **C. Honor, Integrity, Responsibility, Skepticism, Irony: Ethics and Ethos of Opposition**

The ethos and strategy that Michnik advocated as an oppositionist in the 1980s was that of “self-limiting revolution” (in his comrade Jacek Kuron's phrase). The limits in question included a policy of acting in the open, a refusal to use violence under any circumstances, and a renunciation of seeking political power (that is, control of the state) at all. This policy involved rejecting the militant, disciplined ethos of “an army or a party of the Leninist kind” in favor of “a bond of shared aims and solidarity in action. And respect for individuality. And consent for plurality.” The ethos of the opposition also called for self-limitation on the theoretical level: a renunciation of the ideal of utopia. Michnik insisted that “We shouldn't fight for a free society that's free of conflicts, but for a conflictual society in which conflicts can be resolved within the

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<sup>885</sup> LP 5, 86, 99, 209, 300-301, 314.

rules of the democratic game.” The goal of achieving perfection through politics was both futile – for “One pays for everything in politics. There is no such thing as total justice” – and dangerous: “I always believed that a perfect society could be created only in a concentration camp”.<sup>886</sup>

Michnik and other oppositionists' thinking about means reflected both ethical ideals, and a concern with *effectiveness*. Practical and moral considerations were, indeed, not clearly distinguished: as Michnik explained, “In our reasoning, pragmatism is inseparably intertwined with idealism.”<sup>887</sup> Morality – in the sense of acting in accordance with moral principles one could honestly accept and advocate – was both the means and the end of the opposition: they pursued not power, but “freedom”; they sought not to serve “the interests of specific social groups”, but to “rescue values” through action.<sup>888</sup> They adopted a policy of openness and non-violence in order to win trust and moral authority – and in so doing, spread a commitment to and habit of acting morally. On the other hand, a pragmatic focus on immediate consequences was itself a moral duty, demanded by an ideal of responsibility; at the same time, a truly responsible concern for the consequences of action pointed, not toward ruthlessness, but toward an intense scrupulousness. This is illustrated in Michnik's insistence on adhering to a non-violent strategy. Violent confrontations with the government would likely result in the whole nation paying “an inordinately high price” - a Soviet invasion – for the opposition's “lack of responsibility”. Non-violence was a strategic necessity; it reflected not Gandhian purism, but a hard-headed

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<sup>886</sup> LF 64, 280, 265.

<sup>887</sup> LP 86.

<sup>888</sup> *The Problem with History*, 4.

calculation of the balance of power and the probable consequences of using violence.<sup>889</sup>

It is easy to appreciate the virtues of such a policy in retrospect; things were less clear at the time. A moment of particular difficulty came with the imposition of martial law, and with it the apparent failure of the opposition's "civil society strategy". At this point, the opposition, driven underground, had to decide whether to turn to violence, or to stick to pre-martial law policy of building up civil society. Even some of the main theoreticians of the civil society strategy (now in prison) counseled that the underground should be open to using force. But the leaders of the underground outside of prison decided that they would continue to eschew armed resistance, and avoid the creation of a centralized "secret state". These leaders (most of whom were urban workers) rejected violence for both practical and moral reasons. Practically, they recognized that "though all our Polish uprisings were noble and glorious, they had all failed": underground Solidarity could be no match for the army, the police – and, possibly, Soviet tanks. They also judged that Polish society had had enough of terror: and that to turn to violence would undermine their credibility both at home, and abroad. At the same time, there were concerns of principle: "Solidarity had arisen in nonviolence and if we abandoned that commitment, we would be betraying the movement"; to declare themselves some kind of underground state would be an undemocratic usurpation of power. The underground thus kept to the path of Michnik's "New Evolutionism", seeking to build a decentralized, pluralistic underground society, where directing conspiracy was a matter of providing others with the courage and resources to "do whatever they felt like doing". Such activity was thought of in terms of a "long march", in which people would gradually learn how to be free as part of a process that would be

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<sup>889</sup> LP 190; LF 62.

slow, but would “eventually prove irresistible.”<sup>890</sup>

The decision to renounce violence, while undergoing the risks of dissident action (which included, until martial law was declared, publishing their names and addresses in the statements that they issued) reflected oppositionists sense of *responsibility* both *to* their society, and *for* their own conduct and the consequences of that conduct. This conception of their responsibility fostered an appreciation of the value of *realism* in political judgment. Michnik frequently reminded his readers of the limits imposed by the immediate political situation: “Such is reality. We may not like it, but it must be understood.” The “politics of activism” required the virtues of the political realist: “coolness, distance, and reflection”, “caution, avoidance of the risks inherent in rigid dogma”, “determination and patience, courage and a keen ability to compromise, a sober geopolitical analysis and a flexible tactic of forcing internal changes ... a realistic assessment of one's place in the world ... firmly holding on to the realities of life and rejecting idealistic illusions”.<sup>891</sup> But while “Realism and readiness to make concessions can be virtues in a politician”, they are “virtues that must be closely watched.” Political action under a totalitarian dictatorship “always oscillates between two human motivations, the needs of moral testimony and of political calculation.” If either one of these is lost, political engagement turns into “either ineffective moralizing or immoral manipulation. Both are dangerous, but both are, to a certain extent, unavoidable”. Oppositionists needed to find a balance between – but also manage to include – both hard-headed, realistic tacticians, and “people for whom moral testimony is more

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<sup>890</sup> Kaufman op.cit., 97, quoting Zbigniew Bujak and Wiktor Kulerski. Michnik declared his agreement with Bujak and Kulerski's stance from within prison (see LP, 63).

<sup>891</sup> LP 222, 293-4, 107, 282, 92, 326-7; cf. Ibid 99.

valuable than political efficacy”;<sup>892</sup> they had to cultivate both an *ethos of resistance*, and an *ethos of compromise*.

Forged by oppression, the ethos of resistance encompassed “honor and self-irony, the stubbornness to stand by values ... the courage to believe in romantic ideals,” and the affirmation of individual dignity.<sup>893</sup> One of totalitarianism's basic goals was to crush this sense of dignity, which imposed limits on the state's power over individuals; restoring this sense of dignity was fundamental to the opposition's program. “Impotence in the face of armed evil is probably the worst of human humiliations”, for it undermined the individual's “natural right to dignity”.<sup>894</sup> Thus, the most important part of Solidarity's victories in 1980-81 was in bringing about “a revolution for dignity, a celebration of the rights of the vertebrae, a permanent victory for the straightened spine”.<sup>895</sup> Dignity is for Michnik one of the basic ends of politics; while the “search for dignity”, the attempt to maintain a “tone of dignity and humanism”, constitute the “method” of Michnik's intellectual and political work.<sup>896</sup> Standing up for human dignity could not be separated from the need to be both dignified (though not self-important) and respectful (though not uncritical).

In Michnik's writings the idea of dignity is closely connected to that of *honor*; but while the former is something that may be claimed by all human beings, the latter is an excellence of personal character that is not expected of everyone – but that is sometimes demanded of those

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<sup>892</sup> LP 86, 208-9, 23, 62.

<sup>893</sup> LF 319.

<sup>894</sup> LP 5.

<sup>895</sup> LF 101.

<sup>896</sup> Goldfarb, *Beyond Glasnost*, 151, 144, 146; Michnik, *The Church and the Left*, 92.

engaging in the defense of dignity. Honor (in words Michnik quoted from Alfred de Vigny) is a “proud and unshakable feeling”, an element within an individual's being, which sustains “human dignity in all its beauty” against the threat of despair and cynicism. It is a particular powerful motivational force – “conscience, but multiplied” – which can inspire both proud independence, and “wonderful tolerance, tender kindness, divine leniency and noble forgiveness”.<sup>897</sup> As this suggests, Michnik's invocation of honor on behalf of liberal politics involved an attempt to reconcile – or, cross-fertilize – romantic inspiration with the values and demands of “prosaic civil society.”<sup>898</sup>

The strength of honor rests on a sentiment of pride, one founded in a sense of personal integrity, and which promoted “the ability to say to the high and mighty of this world: *non serviam*.”<sup>899</sup> Honor's motivational power thus derives, as Sharon Krause has argued, in large part from its self-regarding character: “one abides by the honor code not primarily for the sake of others but for one's own sake ... one fails oneself when one violates the honor code ... the motivation that drives it is self-serving and its direct aim is individualistic, the personal desire for self-respect.” At the same time, when the “desire for distinction” takes the form of a sense of honor this desire is “limited, directed, and elevated by reverence for a set of principles that are independent of will or appetite.” Honor consists in adherence to rules or principles which impose absolute limits on the honorable person – “There are some things which the honorable person

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<sup>897</sup> *The Trouble with History*, 143.

<sup>898</sup> The phrase is from Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*, 22, where Vigny is again invoked, in this case to highlight the complexity and tension of the relationship between romantic honor and prosaic liberalism. Rosenblum's book, and Michnik's essay, interestingly draw on exactly the same, post-Napoleonic sources – Vigny, Musset, Stendhal – in exploring the tense relationship between liberalism and romanticism).

<sup>899</sup> *The Trouble with History*, 143.

simply will not do – or must do – as a matter of principle”, regardless of consequences. The rules of honor are “categorical”: they “apply in the same way to everyone”; honor in democratic societies, or on the part of those committed to democratic principles, will encompass the desire that one's fellows enjoy that which one claims for oneself.<sup>900</sup>

Honor, therefore, is related to self-respect in a particular way – to respect for oneself as a moral agent, whose own judgment and principles should guide or bind one. Acting honorably means not only being guided by certain principles, but defending one's ability to act in accordance with one's principles. This means that not only are there things that the honorable person will or will not do, regardless of the consequences; but also that there are things that the honorable person will not accept being done to (or for) herself, or allow herself to be made to do.<sup>901</sup>

The senses of dignity and honor are both motivational, and “navigational”: they guide one in determining how to act in a way appropriate to the quest for self-respect, as well as inspiring the pursuit of this quest. For those living under Communism, a sense of their dignity and honor served as both a standard for conduct, and a sustaining source of strength. Thus, in arguing that oppositionists should not sign declarations of loyalty to the regime, even when doing so was often a condition for freedom, Michnik explained that such declarations were “supposed to make us into lowly and servile people, who will not rise up to fight for freedom and dignity.” To betray one's principles was “to negate yourself, to wipe out the meaning of your

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<sup>900</sup> Sharon Krause, *Liberalism with Honor* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 3, 5, 10, 11, 15-16, 20, 28-30.

<sup>901</sup> Cf. Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism”, in J.J.C. Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*. (Cambridge University Press, 1973); 77-150, and especially 103-4, 114-118; idem, “Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence”, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 40-53; Michael Walzer, *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War and Citizenship* (Harvard University Press, 1970), 201.

life; to betray the people who have faith in you”. To thus “forsake your dignity” was “not a price worth paying to have the prison gates opened for you.” Upholding one's honor was necessary to sustaining a tolerable sense of identity, to living with oneself. And because self-respect was a condition for living a decent life, “it is not courage that makes me choose prison instead of banishment. If anything, I am making this choice out of fear. Out of the fear that by saving my neck I may lose my honor.”<sup>902</sup>

Honor, then, is a matter of acting in a way that reflects and sustains one's sense of oneself as a moral agent – someone whose (self-)worth depends on living up to certain demands. Michnik adds another element to the content of honor – that of *chivalry*. This emphasis reflects both the local traditions of Polish culture, and the instinctive identification with the weak which typified liberalism, as against the totalitarian tendency to admire power. Honor rightly understood demanded that “We must defend every persecuted person as if he or she were our closest comrade. Only then will we be faithful to our ideals. All the rest is sham.”<sup>903</sup> Part of being a person of honor was standing up not only for oneself, but for all who were weak, threatened, victimized; and the sense of contempt which is the flip-side of honor was to be directed, above all, against bullies – those who, in asserting and exploiting their superiority of strength, reveal their moral inferiority.

This brings us to another dimension of honor: as an *offensive* as well as defensive weapon against those in power. Trying to undermine or lower their opponents was a way for the authorities to bolster their image in their own eyes, as well as among the wider population. The

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<sup>902</sup> LP 10, 6-7, 24, 11.

<sup>903</sup> *The Church and the Left*, 157.



opposition's refusal to play along undermined the regime's legitimacy by making it hard for them to dismiss their opponents as opportunists like themselves. This is why it was important for Michnik to openly refuse any cooperation with the authorities while he was in prison: "Let my little gesture of denial be a small contribution to the sense of honor and dignity in this country ... For you, traders in other people's freedom, let it be a slap in the face." Thus, in an open letter that made him a national hero, Michnik called General Kiszczak, the Minister of Internal Affairs responsible for applying martial law and his associates "vindictive, dishonorable swine", telling him "even if there ever was a spark of decency in your hearts, you have long buried this feeling in the brutal and dirty power struggle which you wage among yourselves."<sup>904</sup>

Such exhibitions of honor – and invective – were necessary to sustain opposition to tyranny in the face of intimidation and privation. But they had their dangers. Self-righteousness, narcissistic moral exhibitionism, the subordination of rational and other-regarding considerations to one's own ethical self-esteem or glory, are the dangerous fruits of preoccupation with honor. To seek the exhilarating sense of being a hero as the motive or end of political activity is ethically unserious and politically irresponsible. As Sharon Krause has warned, "The desire to be a hero may turn into a desire to slay dragons, or to search perpetually for (and even invent) opportunities for heroism."<sup>905</sup> A politics of ostentatious heroism is destabilizing, and potentially threatening to those who may find themselves the collateral damage of the hero's struggle. And it can distort political judgment, drawing activists to those actions and strategies that are most attractive – or simply most visible – to the detriment of less glamorous but more significant

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<sup>904</sup> LP 67-8.

<sup>905</sup> Krause, *Liberalism with Honor*, 7.

activity. Michnik was well aware of this. He warned his countrymen to be wary of the “adoration of gesture”, which distracted from less glamorous but more constructive thought and action on behalf of society.<sup>906</sup> While modeling apparently heroic behavior, he made a point of insisting that his resistance to the authorities “is not heroism. It is mere common sense.” Addressing himself, along with his reader (a frequent technique of his prison writings), he wrote that “You know that you are no hero and that you never wanted to be one. You have never wanted to die for your nation, or for freedom, or for anything else, for that matter ... You have always wanted to be alive, to live like a normal person, to have respect for yourself and for your friends.”<sup>907</sup>

In his writings, and through his example, Michnik advocated his own brand of heroism: a protective rather than aggressive heroism, consisting in identification with the victims rather than the victors; a heroism based not on a conviction of one's own excellence, but on awareness of one's limitations. Poland needed “ordinary, decent, rational people”, rather than extraordinary excellence; Michnik therefore disavowed an overly heroic stance: “I don't like the words inflexibility and martyr. I'm not comfortable in that role.” He did write stirring polemics; but he also labored quietly in organizing underground academic seminars, and arranging the printing of samizdat texts; part of his sense of honor was engaging in the unglamorous day-to-day work of dissidence. Nevertheless, Michnik recognized, and later acknowledged, that in the opposition “One professed humanistic values but lived within heroic values.”<sup>908</sup> Sometimes heroism is necessary to make society safe for the un-heroic – to create the conditions of a society that does

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<sup>906</sup> LP 193.

<sup>907</sup> LF 293, 91; LP 11, 23.

<sup>908</sup> LF 24, 64-5, 91, 293, 323; LP 86, 11, 23.

not require heroism. Given the cost of heroism to those who practice it, and the dangers of heroism to those around them, creating such a society is a worthy goal.

Although Michnik most often spoke the language of honor, *integrity* may be a better term for the quality of character at the heart of this modest heroism. Honor, with its close connection to a sense of social standing, poses a danger of ostentatious display, being guided by conventions of what is fitting rather than by truly independent, reflective judgment. The notion of integrity does not suggest these same dangers. To be a person of integrity is to be guided by one's own deeply-held principles, and the sense of oneself as a moral person in which they are involved, rather than by the craving for external renown. And it is to impose limits on oneself, as well as to assert one's rights: if honor involves, among other things, saying, with e. e. cummings's Olaf, that "there is some shit I will not eat",<sup>909</sup> integrity is, among other things, a matter of saying "there are some things I will not do".

Michnik's work and example help us to identify two elements of integrity. First, as a feature of *motivation*, integrity is a consistent, action-guiding desire or resolution to live in accord with one's moral beliefs, no matter the emotional or material cost to oneself. Integrity means being true to oneself, in the particular sense of being true to what one recognizes, not as pleasant or convenient, but as important or valuable. It is terribly important to the person of integrity to be able to look at herself in the mirror without shame.<sup>910</sup> Michnik exhibited this facet of integrity when he declared to his captors that the "real punishment would be if on your

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<sup>909</sup> e. e. cummings, "i sing of Olaf glad and big"; thanks to Michael Rosen for pointing me to this source.

<sup>910</sup> See LP 68; *The Church and the Left*, 214. The motivational force of integrity was well captured by Hume: "Inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, a satisfactory review of our own conduct; these are circumstances, very requisite to happiness, and will be cherished and cultivated by every honest man, who feels the importance of them." David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Section IX Part II, in Hume, *The Enquiries*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Clarendon Press, 1975), 283.

orders I had to spy, wave a truncheon, shoot workers, interrogate prisoners, and issue disgraceful sentences. I am happy to find myself on the right side, among the victims and not among the victimizers.”<sup>911</sup>

Second, integrity involves an approach to undertaking action, whereby one seeks to act in a way that is directed to actualizing one's ideals, and does not contradict those ideals. Integrity suggests a sort of mindful consistency between avowed beliefs and actual behavior, and an acceptance of the implications of the principles one explicitly embraces, or implicitly adopts in one's decisions about action – including a willingness to pay personal prices.<sup>912</sup> The person of integrity wants to feel that she has remained true to what she thinks important and right. But the person of integrity goes further: considering how to live life in accordance with her principles, she considers both the consequences of her conduct for that to which she is committed; and whether her actions accord with, or violate, the model of conduct and the sense of self to which her principles point. If one values justice or intellectual rigor or freedom, say, one should seek to live in pursuit of those values in ways that are themselves consistent with those values – and not treat or judge people unjustly in the (supposed) service of justice, or make hasty and simplistic judgments in the (supposed) service of intellectual rigor, or deprive people of agency and choice in the (supposed) service of freedom. This means that integrity serves as a guard against cynicism, against opportunism, and against ruthlessness.

For Michnik, maintaining integrity meant not allowing either victimization or victory, his

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<sup>911</sup> LP 68.

<sup>912</sup> Thus, when Michnik was released from prison as part of a general amnesty in 1984, he refused to leave until he had been given a chance to disprove the charges against him; he had to be forcibly evicted from his prison cell (Goldfarb, *After the Fall*, 17)..

recognition of the regime's evil or his conviction of his own cause's justice, to make him forsake the principles for which he was fighting in the process of the fight. Thus he warned General Kiszczak, the head of his jailers, of the “reckoning” he would face, and expressed the hope that “when your life is in danger I will be able to appear in time to help you ... and I will be able to place myself once again on the side of the victims and not the victimizers. Even if, afterward, you should once more wonder at my incorrigible stupidity and decide to lock me back in prison all over again.”<sup>913</sup> These words show Michnik to be committed to integrity; the fact that, since the fall of Communism, Michnik has indeed been a defender of General Kiszczak and other leading Communists shows him to be a man of integrity. Michnik's embrace of his former jailers has been as unpopular with his former comrades as his earlier dissidence had been despised by the authorities.

Michnik's willingness to go against the authorities, and then against many of his anti-authoritarian comrades, highlights the ethos of individualism – the sense of life as something for which each individual is responsible to herself, so that each individual can claim rights to decide, and should assume responsibility for, her own fate – inherent in his conception of integrity. Such obdurate individualism has its political dangers. Too much devotion to personal integrity and individual independence may lead to overweening “moral egotism and arrogance”, which poses a danger to any human association that (sometimes) requires subordination of individuals' self-image to the needs of others. There is a need to balance the claims of solidarity and integrity.<sup>914</sup> But while one may sometimes need to subordinate personal convictions to the

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<sup>913</sup> LP 70.

<sup>914</sup> See Walzer, *Obligations*, 194, 196, 200.

needs of a larger cause or movement, one must always retain the right and responsibility to make such a decision as an individual, guided by one's own moral commitments and judgment.<sup>915</sup>

Michnik's assertions of the sovereignty of conscience, the value of individual judgment and the claims of the individual voice to be heard were a direct response to the Bolshevik political ideal of unquestioning unity.<sup>916</sup> While there were few Bolshevik true believers in 1970s Poland, there was a need to revive a sense of individualism among a population that had succumbed to the values of a totalitarian system, or been cowed into passivity. In such conditions, the fight for democracy required individuals to be ready to disregard the consensus of the majority, to “go it alone” against social pressure. But decaying Bolshevism was not the only threat to individualism. The practice of oppositional politics, with its (quite proper) demands for solidarity and discipline, also threatened to emulate Bolshevism in quashing individual conscience. And democracy itself has need of individuals who, guided by conscience and ready to assert their convictions, will stand up bravely in the face of illiberal, reckless, and callous majorities – as Michnik has repeatedly done in his battles for political and religious toleration and civil libertarianism in democratic Poland.<sup>917</sup>

Michnik therefore advocated a political ethic of personal independence. He also practiced it. This meant retaining a fiercely independent, individualistic position (“I am an intellectual, and

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<sup>915</sup> *The Church and the Left*, 243.

<sup>916</sup> E.g.: “A true Bolshevik has submerged his personality in the collectivity ... he would be ready to believe that black was white, and white was black, if the Party required it. In order to become one with this great Party he would fuse himself with it, abandon his own personality, so that there was no particle left inside him which was not at one with the Party.” G. L. Pyatakov, quoted in Walzer, *Obligations*, 193n4.

<sup>917</sup> Cf. Walzer, *op.cit.*, , 192, 194, 196, 200.

I speak for myself”).<sup>918</sup> It also meant speaking not only for, but *to*, himself, enacting in his writings an internal dialog through which he exhibited the power of the individual conscience to serve as a guide to action. To have a conscience – a capacity for moral discrimination – and to be capable of being guided by it, are necessary conditions for integrity. It is through the promptings of conscience that individuals come to accept certain limits, and impose them on themselves. Thus Michnik, addressing his captor:

“You may not know that to lie and insult is not good, that to betray is bad, to imprison and murder is even worse. Never mind that such things are expedient – they are forbidden. Yes, General, forbidden. Who forbids them? .... something invisible, a passerby in the darkness, will appear before you and say: this you must not do. That is conscience.”<sup>919</sup>

An awareness of the urgings of conscience, and of its power, grows out of the realization of one's agency – one's capacity, and need, to make choices about how to act; and from the realization of what these choices can mean for oneself and others. Michnik presented the choice to take part in opposition as a heroic assertion of agency against large, impersonal forces. This affirmation of individual agency was liberating and empowering – but also imposed a burden: for it meant that “no one can answer for me. No one can absolve me from my responsibility.”<sup>920</sup>

Michnik's conception of the ethics of political agency thus hinges – like Weber's – on the notion of responsibility; the role responsibility plays in his thought allows us to re-examine the concept. We can distinguish several ways of understanding the condition of *being responsible*. One is the sense of an action and its consequences being attributable (which usually means,

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<sup>918</sup> LF 6.

<sup>919</sup> LP 40, 68-9.

<sup>920</sup> *The Church and the Left*, 207, 214.

*causally* attributable) to one (“I am responsible for the political graffiti that is on the wall”). Another is the sense of having a *duty* to undertake a task, or produce a particular result (“I am responsible for getting the samizdat distributed”). Another – already encountered in our discussion of Weber – is a matter of having or cultivating a particular personal disposition. For Michnik, being *dispositionally* responsible meant, first, seeing as oneself as an agent who is able to have an impact on the quality of one's society, and *taking* responsibility for one's actions and their consequences, rather than seeing oneself as a cog in a larger apparatus, or a mere instrument of history. Second, being dispositionally responsible meant accepting a duty to act morally – and, particularly, to respond meaningfully to moral wrongdoing, rather than passively collaborating in the commission of evil, or contenting oneself with an empty display of high-mindedness.<sup>921</sup> Third, dispositional responsibility required being mindful of the ways in which one's actions affect others: in inspiring trust and emulation, creating expectations and dependence, and promoting (sometimes risky) action.<sup>922</sup>

Dispositional responsibility, Michnik suggests, is one guard against the self-indulgence of ostentatious heroism. But there are other, less solemn but still crucial, dispositional safeguards. While he inhabited the role of a public moralist and voice of conscience, Michnik also took up the praise and practice of irony and skepticism. Such a spirit threatened the orthodoxy and conformism on which the Communist regime depended. Recognizing this, the authorities inveighed against the supposedly nihilistic skepticism of the opposition. To this Michnik replied: “More dangerous today than 'doubt, negativism, and demented criticism' is

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<sup>921</sup> See e.g. *ibid.* 213; LF 91

<sup>922</sup> LP 23.



[sic] fanaticism, total affirmation, and a demented absence of criticism. More than the 'licentiousness' of the radicals I fear the puritanism of state officials. A greater sin than long hair is the state's order to cut it.”<sup>923</sup>

Indeed, far from reflecting cynicism or derision, the spirit of skepticism was tied to the ideals of freedom and (in Vaclav Havel's resonant phrase) “living in truth”. The “fundamental feature” of totalitarianism, according to Michnik, was the attempt to “capture control of the human mind” through the construction of a “spiritual world in which everything is clear, unambiguous, and 'defined to the last detail'”; and the maintenance of this world through pervasively enforced acts of affirmation of official doctrine. The regime did not only impose its ideology *on* its subjects; it sought to implant it *in* them. Totalitarian regimes taught people to “live in lies and slavery”, fostering “conformism, intellectual and moral sloth” and “captivity of the spirit”. The opposition found itself confronting two dominant features of the intellectual universe of totalitarianism that seemed to be contradictory, but were in fact closely tied: claims to possession of absolute, incorrigible truth; and the systematic and sometimes blatant use of lies backed by power, and power backed by lies.<sup>924</sup>

Skepticism represented a response to both of these features. Against the claims to possession of absolute truth, oppositionist intellectuals developed an ethic marked by an “austere attitude toward the limits of intellectual work”, claiming insight and expertise on particular matters, not the possession of some grand “truth” about society – except, perhaps, for the truth

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<sup>923</sup> LP 193; LF 146; *The Church and the Left*, 167.

<sup>924</sup> LP 201, 206-7, 313. The classic analysis of this phenomenon was Vaclav Havel's “The Power of the Powerless” (1978). Havel wrote the essay as the introduction to a collection of essays by Soviet Bloc dissidents he had planned to organize with Michnik, whom he entrusted with circulating the essay in Poland. See Elzbieta Matynia, ed. *An Uncanny Era: Conversations Between Vaclav Havel and Adam Michnik* (Yale University Press, 2014), 23-8.

that such claims to the possession of truth were dangerous. Their outlook was marked by a “deep sense of fallibility”, and an awareness of the “distance between the ideological conception” and the “actual workings” of the social order. Opposed to systematic thinking and comprehensive theories, Michnik preferred an essayistic, consciously incomplete style, in which “reasonable insights and limited truths about specific issues” would be presented, investigated – and if need be, revised.<sup>925</sup> He called upon his fellow intellectuals – and fellow citizens – to cultivate a practiced attention to tangible particulars, freed as much as possible from wishful thinking, theoretical preconceptions, and broad generalizations; to focus on the concrete, to “check everything at the level of the individual, and discover, on the basis of this singular example, just what remains from the grand generalities”.<sup>926</sup>

While he rejected claims to certain knowledge of some absolute truth, Michnik also asserted the importance of the idea of truth, and the search for truth, to public life; for “the truth – no matter how bitter – liberates critical reflection, personal dignity, and the courage to live in accordance with values”.<sup>927</sup> The spirit of skepticism represented a reaction against the fact that “We live each day in lies, amongst others immersed in their lies”. Such lying “degrades man, insults human dignity, and undermines authority.” Conversely, “[s]earching for the truth and speaking the truth are ways to prevent being reduced to bondage”. “Living in truth” thus meant, not the comfortable embrace of dogma, but an active search for truth, and a never-ending process of questioning: “If, after all, people reared in mendacity are urged to 'live in truth', how can they

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<sup>925</sup> Goldfarb, *Beyond Glasnost*, xvii, 165, 20, 163, 206, 212..

<sup>926</sup> Stanislaw Baranczak, quoted in *The Church and the Left*, 169.

<sup>927</sup> *The Trouble with History*, 51.

do so if not through criticism, doubt, and skepticism?” Respect for truth required not only questioning freely, but speaking frankly – including about both one's own mistakes, and one's belief that others were mistaken. “Living in truth” thus meant not only rejecting orthodoxy, but embracing disagreement.<sup>928</sup>

Michnik's defense of skepticism was a response not only to the calumnies of the authorities, but to the suspicions of absolutists within the opposition. To them, Michnik insisted that “Skepticism is dangerous only for the adherents of arrogance, might, and deception. It is a valuable weapon in the fight against the totalitarian tendencies of the world in which we live”; “the necessary conditions for courage and self-sacrifice ... [are] intellectual independence, criticism, and creative mistrust.” If the opposition was to realize the ideals it sought to serve, it must embrace the ethos, not of the “priest”, but of the “jester” (to adopt Michnik teacher, Leszek Kolakowski's, terms); not of the saint, but of the ironist who realizes that “The only thing we know with absolute certainty is that death will not pass us by. All the rest is groping. Our lot is the toil of existence, the stubborn search for truth.”<sup>929</sup> For Michnik, this spirit of defiant skepticism is an integral part of liberalism itself, which traces its descent to “the Enlightenment”, with its “style of jokes, sarcasm, and irony”.<sup>930</sup>

Skepticism of dogma, and a sense of irony, both reflected and fostered appreciation for complexity. A recognition of the complexity of human life offered a safeguard against Manicheanism and fundamentalism; it was a necessary condition for acting effectively, and

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<sup>928</sup> *The Church and the Left*, 213, 120-1, 170; cf. *Ibid.* 101, 165; LP 167.

<sup>929</sup> *The Church and the Left*, 170, 128.

<sup>930</sup> *The Trouble with History*, 125.

judging justly. Michnik warned his comrades against responding to “the Stalinist primers which we were once force-fed” with their own primers, in which “the colors are equally dense and bright and the worldview equally infantile.” This was dangerous, because “abandoning a worldview that encompasses the complexity of human obligations and achievements and replacing it with a crystal-clear picture” led both to poor analyses, hampering the opposition's effectiveness, and to unjust judgments and treatment of others.<sup>931</sup>

Irony and skepticism were connected to another quality Michnik considered vital for both oppositional and democratic politics: modesty. On the one hand, modesty and skepticism balanced one another – modesty prevented smug dismissal, while an implacable skepticism kept modesty from degenerating into meek or credulous acceptance of any claim by others. One of the challenges of intellectual – and of moral – life is to maintain a balance of proud independence, and fallibilist modesty. Thus Michnik (whose own training was in history) has written that historians must “observe the spirit of both humility and boldness at the same time”, searching for truth and questioning orthodoxy without becoming dogmatic, being respectful of others' perspectives without exempting their claims from scrutiny. The same, perhaps, is true of the political actor.<sup>932</sup>

At the same time, modesty and skepticism could be mutually supporting. A proper skepticism would lead one to recognize that “Reason tells us to put down a question mark” when judging others. Such modesty was particularly becoming for intellectuals, whose cultivated skepticism must be turned inwards, to protect against moral arrogance and political folly.

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<sup>931</sup> LP 178, 186-7.

<sup>932</sup> *The Trouble with History*, 52; cf. LF 94-5 (quoted as the epigraph).

Intellectuals were particularly prone to the a tendency to believe that they have figured out what was really going on underneath the surface of appearances: but they were “usually just doing some wishful thinking, confusing their own desires for [sic] reality ... things are never as bad as we fear and never as good as we would like to believe.”<sup>933</sup> A sense of irony was also connected to modesty, representing an admission of human fallibility and absurdity that did not spare the observer.

Modesty is perhaps too vague and soft a word for what Michnik advocates. It may be better to speak of humility<sup>934</sup> or even, as in Niebuhr's case, a practice of contrition: a sense of past failing and present frailty, even a certain *shame*. It is vital to the political health of a society and the pursuit of justice that those engaging in politics practice self-criticism,<sup>935</sup> acknowledging those mistakes and misdeeds in which they (we) have had a part: “We ought not to reckon with the sins of others before we reckon with our own.” A humble acknowledgment of one's own weakness is an antidote to intolerance; awareness of the ease with which we deceive ourselves, and a vigilant guarding against one's own tendency to do so, is the best protection against both imprudence and moral folly.<sup>936</sup> Michnik criticized those “moralists” who “without accepting any personal guilt, continu[ed] to attribute responsibility to 'objective conditions'”, and saw guilt and

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<sup>933</sup> LF 94-5, 26, 93; *The Church and the Left*, 241.

<sup>934</sup> One should distinguish between humility as a “demand of correct self-appraisal”, and humility as a perception of a duty of subservience to God or to something larger than oneself (cf. Williams, “Critique of Utilitarianism”, 117n1). The latter is hard to reconcile with Michnik's doughty individualism; the former is not.

<sup>935</sup> It is important to distinguish between such scrupulous, and wholly independent and un-coerced self-criticism, and the sort of enforced self-criticism used as a tool of ideological control in, most notably, Mao's Cultural Revolution.

<sup>936</sup> See e.g. *The Trouble with History* 24-8, 34. On resistance to self-deception (or “self-deceit”) as a key moral resource in political action see Aaron Garrett, “Courage, Political Resistance, and Self-Deceit”, *Boston University Law Review*, 90:4 (August 2010), 1771-1783.

weakness in others, not themselves. To exempt oneself from blame, or indeed from moral scrutiny, shifting the odium onto others, was “egoism and self-deception”, and a recipe for (passive or active) inhumanity.<sup>937</sup>

Michnik sought to exemplify such humility and self-criticism in both his advice to others, and his own actions. Thus, in advising Russian dissidents to seek compromise with Gorbachev “at all costs”, he urged them to “stop thinking in terms of how right you are and how determined you are to defend your position ... my side shared responsibility for the imposition of martial law in Poland, because we had failed to create a language of dialogue. If there is a compromise that breaks down, everyone is responsible.”. Noting that “[i]deological polemics – the logic of political disputes – always make people exaggerate their adversaries' flaws and whitewash their own mistakes”, he sought to apply “the opposite method”. Thus, after criticizing the Left in general for its passivity in the face of Communist repression of religion, Michnik writes: “But then, why talk about others? For I myself participated in this ignominious spectacle, though the very thought of it makes me blush with shame. I am embarrassed by my own stupidity, though, of course, stupidity is no justification.” Reflecting on his own failings, Michnik also comes to better understand the tendencies of others as well: “What guided my hand was not weakness of character but rather the absurd conviction that I was speaking out in a just cause ... I make no attempt to justify my actions, for nothing can justify participation in organized lies. It is not the motives but the consequences of our actions that are most important”.<sup>938</sup> And, in a remarkable passage – speaking both for and to himself, after having cautioned his fellow dissidents against

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<sup>937</sup> *The Church and the Left*, 52, 70-71; LF 145.

<sup>938</sup> LF 63; LP 330, *The Church and the Left*, 87-8.

sectarianism – he reflected that “I too will forget all this, I will become blind to these perils. I will not have the energy, time, and courage to be aware of them, to analyze and describe them. That is why I am writing about them today, as I sit safely behind bars in Bialoleka.”<sup>939</sup> Here we have the apogee, both of Michnik's practice of humility and self-criticism, and of his “prophylactic” approach to political prescription, which sought to identify and foster ethical safeguards against recurrent dangers.

The ethos of modest and skeptical political idealism is based on a recognition that there are “inescapable limits of the human condition” – and that there must therefore also be limits on what individuals should be willing or should allow themselves to do.<sup>940</sup> And because, as humility teachers, there are limits on one's fitness to wield power, there must also be limits maintained on one's ability to do so. Imposing such limits on oneself – as the opposition did in its policy of self-limiting revolution – required, in the words of one sympathetic Western interpreter of oppositionist thought, a “healthy awareness” of the movement's own “partiality”, and a “ceaseless reflexivity about itself: the means it employs, the limitations of its vision, and the existence of alternative projects and groups with which it must come to some rapprochement”. Such acceptance of limitation was in turn based on a recognition that “any claims to absolute righteousness or moral purity [are] dangerous ... As Camus noted, pure and unadulterated virtue is homicidal.”<sup>941</sup>

**D. The Beauty of Grayness, the Courage of Sisyphus: An Ethic and Ethos for Democratic**

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<sup>939</sup> LP 61.

<sup>940</sup> LF 73.

<sup>941</sup> Isaac, “Civil Society and the Spirit of Revolt”, 360.

## **Politics**

Even before Communism fell Michnik anticipated the dangers of the post-Communist period, warning against a “triumphalist attitude that leads to intolerance”, which could promote “political fanaticism”.<sup>942</sup> And triumph was likely to be followed by recrimination: for resentment, anger, the demonizing of opponents, and the desire for revenge were part of the “psychology of captivity” or “the psychology of slavery.” These feelings inspired resistance and revolution, but they were also dangerous to the causes resistance and revolutions (generally) claim to serve: they lead only to new slavery, the building of new prisons where the old ones stood.<sup>943</sup> Since the fall of Communism Michnik’s writings have insistently stressed the need to guard against aggressive triumphalism and the hunger for vengeance.

Michnik was under no illusion as to how difficult the transition from moral witness to democratic politics was, psychologically and morally: “The world of dictatorship was in black and white. It was a struggle between Good and Evil, between total Truth versus absolute Lies ... Democracy is qualitatively different. It’s a world of clashing viewpoints, fragmentary and conflicting interests”<sup>944</sup> Former dissidents had to learn to give up what had once sustained them: “simplicity and moral purity are the attractions of a dissident's life, but they can also lead to its great danger ... Being a dissident is a matter of affirming a moral position and holding to it no matter what. Politics, on the other hand, is always a matter of compromise.”<sup>945</sup> The opposition,

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<sup>942</sup> *The Church and the Left*, 238.

<sup>943</sup> LP 50-52; LF 107, 152-3; In these latter passages Michnik invokes the experience of the French Revolution.

<sup>944</sup> Adam Michnik, “The Sisyphus of democracy”, Interview by Philippe Demenet, online at [http://www.unesco.org/courier/2001\\_09/uk/dires.htm](http://www.unesco.org/courier/2001_09/uk/dires.htm)

<sup>945</sup> Michnik, quoted in Kaufman, “Poland's Plucky Activist”.



struggling against corrupt, powerful forces, was inclined to moral absolutism, both because the Communist regime really was evil, and because entering into opposition required great courage, idealism and integrity, and fostered loyalty and self-sacrifice; without such conviction of one's rightness and one's opponents' wrongness, the resolution necessary for the hard, dangerous work of opposition was hard to sustain. Facing the need to daily make hard choices and real sacrifices for oneself and one's friends, it was only natural that the opposition demonized Communists and made itself angelic”, both in order to keep their spirits up – and because that was the way things seemed to be. But “woe to those moral absolutists who emerge victorious in political struggles”: they were all too ready to become tyrants themselves.<sup>946</sup>

Expressing, and seeking to combat, the former dissidents' disillusionment with “normal” political life, Michnik has offered a picture of politics that would be familiar to any “realist”. The former proponent of an “anti-politics” of moral witness has come to sound strikingly Machiavellian in his conception of politics, which he sees as “ruled by astuteness, cunning, the sense of compromise and intrigue. Truth, spiritual depth, and honor are not exactly the attributes of parliamentary politics”.<sup>947</sup> If political actors can't have wholly clean hands, they also often can't stand having particularly sensitive noses.

At the same time, Michnik has insisted on the continued importance of moral idealism – and the need to embrace parliamentary democracy, with all its venality, for moral reasons. Accepting and adjusting to the “gray” world of democracy was not a matter of abandoning the dissident's commitment to “moral courage”; rather, moral courage “changed its form in the

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<sup>946</sup> LF 322-3.

<sup>947</sup> *The Trouble with History* 125.

world of real politics”, becoming a matter of fortitude which allowed former dissidents – “these uncompromising people” – to “make a series of compromises between what they wanted to do and what they could do, between the voice of conscience and the pragmatic dictate of common sense.”<sup>948</sup>

Defending his positions, Michnik has articulated both an account of democracy, and of an ethos of democratic life marked by the practice of compromise, forbearance, and forgiveness, and calling for virtues of patience, “courage, imagination, and mercy”.<sup>949</sup> Democracy, Michnik insists, should be understood as a “process of struggle”. It requires “an ability to critically assess one's own views along with a willingness to revise them” as well as a “noble nonconformism”<sup>950</sup> It also demands acceptance of political and ideological pluralism, conflict and disagreement – and the possibility that one's opponents might win. This was crucial for Michnik, and intolerable for other former opponents – and victims – of Communism, who could not stand to see former Communists prevailing in Polish society and politics.

Against calls for the identification, and punishment, of those who had collaborated in the Communist regime, Michnik has argued for amnesty and inclusion. While all for “the clear identification of good and evil”, he also felt the need to remind his fellow Poles that “the Communists didn't have a monopoly on wicked deeds, and the rest of us weren't all paragons of virtue.” One should not blur the boundary between good and evil in assessing the years of Communism; “but can anyone claim to be entirely without guilt? Can anyone claim to be the

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<sup>948</sup> *The Trouble with History*, 4-5.

<sup>949</sup> “What Does Democracy Need?”, quoted in Matynia, *Performative Democracy*, 75.

<sup>950</sup> *The Church and the Left*, 208-9, quoting Bohdan Cywinski.

bearer of Historical Good?”<sup>951</sup> The same tendency to identify with the tide of history that had marked Communism now threatened, through anti-Communism, to once again crush ideological pluralism and political toleration in Poland. Michnik has insisted that “We must reject one camp’s domination over another, with endless settlements of scores. Our country must make room for everybody”: for “freedom [is] for all, even for former Bolsheviks.”<sup>952</sup> Maintaining freedom for all – and, ultimately, securing freedom for any – depended on Poles cultivating “the difficult art of forgiveness”<sup>953</sup>

Michnik strove to practice what he preached: that it was sometimes a struggle was part of the point. He himself was not immune to the tendency toward Manichaenism – hence, one suspects, his particular vehemence: his awareness of this tendency in himself has made his commitment to forgiveness and compromise all the more strenuous. This has led to actions – such as befriending, and aiding, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the architect of martial law – which have made even his more sympathetic former comrades queasy.<sup>954</sup> Others have been frankly angered by such (sometimes ostentatious) acts of forgiveness; Michnik has admitted that he failed to understand that many others were not ready to forgive as quickly as he. Therefore, while he continues to hold to his views on the importance of forgiveness and evils of vengeance, he has expressed regret for his moment of tone-deafness to the feelings of society; and acknowledged that while we may forgive the wrongs done to us as individuals, it is not in our

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<sup>951</sup> LF 297.

<sup>952</sup> “The Sisyphus of Democracy” (interview with Philippe Demenet, *Unesco Courier*, September 2001), accessed online at [http://www.unesco.org/courier/2001\\_09/uk/dires.htm](http://www.unesco.org/courier/2001_09/uk/dires.htm); “Adam Michnik: The Fear of Russia's Wrong Direction”, accessed online at [http://www.robertamsterdam.com/2008/11/adam\\_michnik\\_the\\_fear\\_of\\_russi.htm](http://www.robertamsterdam.com/2008/11/adam_michnik_the_fear_of_russi.htm)

<sup>953</sup> LP 40.

<sup>954</sup> LF 260-2.

power to forgive the wrongs done to others.<sup>955</sup> Yet it *is* both the right and the duty of an intellectual – or citizen – committed to liberal principles and democratic institutions to insist on the need for tolerance and pluralism, while acknowledging the emotional prices they exact.

The need to accept a plurality of opinions, and forebear from acting on animosity and the desire for vengeance, are linked to a central motif of Michnik's political thought: his defense of compromise as the essential feature of democratic politics.<sup>956</sup> Compromise is vital both as a condition for *peace*, and as an expression of *respect* for “the principles of pluralism and inalienable human rights”.<sup>957</sup> For Michnik (as for Berlin, on my reading) pluralism refers both to a perception of human moral experience, and an ethical stance or outlook in response to this experience – as well as a model of political institutions and behavior informed by this response. In the former sense, pluralism holds that the world “is full of contradictory values”, which cannot all be fully realized in a single society or human life. Politics is complicated, and full of conflict and compromises, because “every right has its counterright ... every conclusion is an oversimplification”. Communism had sought to suppress this truth, to replace the polyphony of human life with a monologue; the result was that “Our culture was in danger of being smothered under sheer uniformity.” Against the the anti-pluralistic imperatives of totalitarianism, Michnik defends “openness, ambiguity, and the multiplicity of values” as “natural and splendid feature[s] of human existence.” To appreciate this requires dispositions of “irony and friendly appraisal of all the formulated positions”. It also requires admitting that one has “no easy formula” for

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<sup>955</sup> LF 231; see Matynia, *Performative Democracy*, 70.

<sup>956</sup> See e.g. LF 89, 110.

<sup>957</sup> LF 89, emphasis added

political choices.<sup>958</sup>

The plurality of values is linked to a plurality of (valid, useful) perspectives. Reality is viewed one way by the activist who seeks to transform it, another by the intellectual who seeks to understand it, and still another by the “moralist” who wishes to judge it. Each of these perspectives has “its light and dark side”. The first is “tainted by one-sidedness”, which is necessary to effectively reshaping the world, but mars the perception of that world in its full many-sidedness. The spectatorial view of the intellectual allows one to comprehend “the complexity of the human condition”, but “clouds the search for solutions” to pressing questions, leading to indecisiveness and lack of commitment. And moralism allows the individual to “notice ethical traps”, but also “favors an exaggerated cult of ‘clean hands’”, and an over-readiness to judge without understanding or accepting the complexity of individual cases. One cannot help but adopt one or another of these perspectives, depending on what tasks one commits to. But to give oneself over wholly to any of these perspectives is to “lose sight of an important segment of reality”, and so fall into potentially dangerous error.<sup>959</sup> Pluralism, therefore, was closely connected to the ethos of irony and humility that Michnik advocated.

Michnik thus spoke out both for compromise between the opposition and the authorities for the sake of civic peace, and for compromise within the movement for the sake of internal pluralism. This was partly a matter of applying his view on the proper relationship between ends and means: “I thought that since I was fighting for democracy, I ought to deal with them [those

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<sup>958</sup> LF 100, 15; *The Church and the Left*, 153; LP 191. See also *The Trouble with History* 46-9.

<sup>959</sup> LP 176-7.

in Solidarity Michnik “couldn't stand”] using democratic methods”.<sup>960</sup> It was also important to respect internal pluralism for the sake of the movement's success: individuals with very different characters made equally important contributions to the movement for democracy against totalitarianism. There was a need for “different types of activity, different temperaments, and different models of concern for our motherland”.<sup>961</sup> “A nation living in captivity cannot be made up solely of heroic conspirators”. To demand heroic activity and hard-line adherence to any program or set of beliefs threatened to cut the opposition off from the more cautious, less active mainstream of society, whose support the opposition needed if it was to make any headway; it also ran the danger of fostering a proto-Leninist model of rule by a virtuously steadfast revolutionary elite.<sup>962</sup>

Michnik thus connected *strategic* concerns about how best to achieve democracy with commitment to what he identified as the principles and ethos of democracy. The connection between these elements was his insight that pursuing liberal-democratic ends through illiberal and undemocratic means tended to block or poison the realization of those ends. For democratic institutions and practices to be successfully introduced to Poland, the basis of a *political culture* of pluralism, mediated conflict, and rudimentary mutual respect had to be established; this was one of the most pressing tasks of the opposition. Creating such a political culture, in turn, depended on political actors cultivating an *ethos of compromise*— and expressing this ethos in their political choices and actions.

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<sup>960</sup> LF 267.

<sup>961</sup> LP 54-5, 59, 60, 150.

<sup>962</sup> Ibid., 153, 208.

Seen from a perspective informed by an affirmation of pluralism and democracy, the messiness and maddening inconsistencies that characterize compromises appear not as vices, but virtues: that a compromise outcome may reflect a number of different principles, which cannot be synthesized into a coherent position, may be embraced as an indication that the compromise reflects or enacts respect for the different values of the opposing parties to the compromise.<sup>963</sup> Compromise could also be affirmed based on a liberal respect for the freedom and dignity of each individual, a democratic commitment to political inclusion, and a pragmatic concern for promoting stability and averting violence.

But, as Michnik acknowledged, compromise is also both emotionally and intellectually difficult, “because it constantly poses the question of its own limits”. There could be “no precise [general] answer” to the question of when compromise was permissible (or laudable or imperative), and when it represented a lamentable or blameworthy abandonment of principle: “every answer is situational.”<sup>964</sup> Michnik has, however, continuously searched for general guidelines to identify the acceptable limits of compromise. One principle is that compromises should not be based on or seek to obscure the truth: even if principles of right and wrong cannot be realized in practice, compromises should not obscure the difference between them. Compromise only contributes to a “healthy public life” if it is “real compromise, both in substance and in the public eye. When a compromise is seen by the public as renunciation of conviction or as flagrant treason, it is no longer a compromise. It becomes a falsehood or a misunderstanding.” In his earlier years as an oppositionist, Michnik also rejected compromises

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<sup>963</sup> Cf. Amy Gutmann and Dennis F. Thompson, “The Mindsets of Political Compromise”, *Perspectives on Politics*, 8:4 (December 2010), 1134.

<sup>964</sup> Michnik quoted Matynia, *Performative Democracy*, 63.

that involved “the proven and conscious harming of other persons” - a prohibition which could rule out a great deal of action depending on how we understand “conscious” harming.<sup>965</sup>

The experience of trying to reach compromises with intransigent authorities led Michnik to better appreciate the need to take into account “the realities of power.” This meant accepting the need to make unpalatable compromises in the face of superior power – but also to insist on some limitation of power as a condition for compromise being possible. Slaves and prisoners cannot compromise with their masters or captors, but only capitulate. For there to be compromise, there must be the possibility of open, licit conflict, the outcome of which is not predetermined; where these are absent, genuine, two-sided compromise is not possible. Thus, compromise with the authorities was necessary to avert the possibility of Soviet occupation – but the autonomy of Solidarity itself could not be compromised; if it were, the process of compromise would become meaningless, because it would not be a compromise between two genuinely distinct entities. There was an important difference between compromise which kept lines of dialog open, and capitulation which brought effective dialog to an end.<sup>966</sup>

Not only the balance of power, but the intentions, ethics, and conception of politics held by one's bargaining-partners was relevant to distinguishing between good and bad compromises. “A policy of conciliation makes sense only if both sides take it seriously”; making agreements with “people who treat the very concept of 'agreements' completely arbitrarily, who regularly go back on their promises, and for whom lies are their daily bread, is contrary to common sense”. Compromise requires some respect between the compromising parties; it will not work when

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<sup>965</sup> LP 13, 107, 184; cf. *The Trouble with History*, 25-6.

<sup>966</sup> See LP 56, 14, LF 112.



one side regard the other as “material to work with”, who can be “either bought or intimidated.” “People are not obliged to be loyal to gangsters ... There can be no talk of compromise with Nazis. A compromise is possible only as a result of a clearly delineated field of understanding”.<sup>967</sup> It was sometimes important to refuse compromise in order to avoid legitimating an authority by engaging in a sham – and also to avoid undermining one's dignity by collaborating in one's own subjection.

Yet, even when compromise appears impossible, this does not free one to embrace radical maximalism. Those who engage in political resistance must be *the sort of people* “who do not ask for rash actions, call for terrorism, or organize urban or rural guerillas”.<sup>968</sup> The search for compromise should always be the default option; one should only conclude that it is impossible after a genuine attempt has been made, or when conditions clearly indicate that an attempt will do no good. Even where particular compromises, or a policy of compromising, cannot be accepted, an ethos of compromise should still be cultivated by those committed to democracy. There is still, in such cases, a need for an *internal* process of compromise – a recognition of the valid claims of others' positions and perspectives, a willingness to concede ground and accept less than one's preferred outcome, an attempt to incorporate the concerns and preferences of others in the outcomes one seeks. In deliberating over whether – and how much – to compromise, a respectful generosity about one's opponents (and humility regarding one's own

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<sup>967</sup> LP 14, 6, 141; LF 16, 20. See also LP 71-5. Weber had made a similar point, insisting that it was impossible to reach “*lasting* compromise” with a system that used illegal or extra-legal persecution and oppression in order to crush political opposition (“Constitutional Democracy in Russia”, *Political Writings* 50; see also *ibid.*, 67) This is not to say that those who have once ruled guiltily can never change. But such change must be “based on an honest self-examination”, and those seeking to enter into dialog must give evidence of having undertaken – or being open to – such self-examination (LP 114).

<sup>968</sup> LP 12.

virtue) should be balanced by a searching realism in evaluating just how reliable the other side is.

Compromise, as indicated above, is an expression not only of appreciation for pluralism, but *respect* for others. As a feature of a political *ethos*, respect involves the quality of one's attitudes towards others. To view others with the sort of moral respect involved in the mindset of compromise is to remain open to revising one's views of them, and engaging in compromise with them tomorrow even if it proves impossible today. It is, in other words, to refrain from mentally writing-off opponents as irredeemable. Accordingly, Michnik rejected a conception and categorization of politics in terms of enemies, preferring to think in terms of adversaries.

The ethos of compromise stands opposed to the ethos of Ultrism. The “Ultra” – the sectarian, the fanatic, the extremist – opposes compromise in the name of an ideal of purity (whether this is a purity of ideals, of public order, or of his own soul). This is a matter of moral, almost of aesthetic, sensibility; it is one of the most powerful influences which obstructs the way of compromise for the morally idealistic and scrupulous– sometimes for good, often for ill. The spirit of compromise renounces this aspiration toward purity and hatred of disagreement and deviation. Those who embrace compromise should therefore regard with skepticism the purist's fear of the slippery slope – the assumption that, once absolute purity is compromised, there will be an irresistible slide of moral erosion to complete corruption and betrayal.<sup>969</sup> One may yield an inch today – and still refuse to cede a foot tomorrow.

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<sup>969</sup> Cf Avishai Margalit, *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 76, 148-9, 151-7, 162, 170-1. While the ethos that Margalit terms “sectarianism” often appeals to this ideal of purity, *political* sectarians, who aim at realizing their ideals through political action, will accept the instrumental use of those whose sinfulness or error makes them incapable of being true allies, and unworthy of respect. As Michnik noted, the sectarian is thus ripe for embracing cynical manipulation in the political realm.

This points to a final feature of an ethos of compromise that I want to extract from Michnik: a particular conception of political *time*. In his sketch of sectarianism, Avishai Margalit notes the belief in an underlying “redemptive scheme” which the sectarian elite, and they alone, have decoded. This works against compromise, in part, through fostering the belief that one's opponents are “on the wrong side of history”, will do anything to avoid their fate – and thus are untrustworthy; but are nevertheless doomed – and thus are not worth compromising with.<sup>970</sup> The *eschatological* element here is also crucial. Historically, this has been particularly strong in revolutionary movements. But it is not unique to them – reactionary ideologies are often marked by an apocalyptic sense of crisis and impending doom. Such a conception of history undermines or blocks the concern with preserving the political process, and the “openness to change over time” that allows this process to be “self-correcting,” which are central assumptions underlying the embrace of compromise.<sup>971</sup>

Against the apocalyptic view of history, Michnik has expounded a “Sisyphean” view of political time. Such a view recognizes that neither personal character nor institutions can be relied upon to work dependably, and that human values and social achievements are therefore always fragile and endangered. The struggle for a more just world “will never be over. It is endless, like Sisyphus in hell, constantly pushing his huge boulder up to an unreachable hilltop.”<sup>972</sup> Yet this Sisyphean conception of politics is not hopeless: it recognizes that “There are

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<sup>970</sup> Ibid., 160-61.

<sup>971</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, “The Mindsets of Political Compromise”, 1141n41.

<sup>972</sup> “The Sisyphus of Democracy”

no final victories, yet also no final defeats.”<sup>973</sup> In rejecting the idea of a “final conflict” and final victory, Sisypheism assumes an on-going process in which there will always be new opportunities and new dangers. Political action should aim at keeping the process going, and maintaining conditions that can provide a basis for effort in the future – rather than seeking to win completely once and for all.

As such, Sisypheism presents its own basis for and limits on compromise. The Sisyphean politician is committed to making compromises that will sustain the political process so as to preserve opportunities in the future; but she will also be wary of compromises that will foreclose such possibilities. The point of compromise in a liberal democracy is to allow all sides to live to fight – or argue – another day; a deal that will run counter to this should be resisted.

Whether to adopt such a view is, itself, a question for practical, situational judgment. There may be *some* cases where a political community really does face an existential crisis. But, knowing the dangers and errors, and the self-dramatizing, self-flattering, and self-justifying temptations involved, we should always be wary of casting a situation in eschatological, transformative terms. Willingness to compromise is based, in part, on the recognition that we will not always be right – and that we nevertheless have a responsibility to do our best for our values and for others. We must also accept that we will not always be right about the compromises that we make – and that we nevertheless have a responsibility to seek compromise where we can.

In the case of attempts to introduce liberal principles and democratic processes to non-democratic, authoritarian polities, the stakes of compromise are particularly high. If Michnik is

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<sup>973</sup> *The Church and the Left*, 214 (quoting Antoni Slonimski).

right, the renunciation of compromise – either between oppositionists and members of the regime, or within the opposition – threatened to poison the roots of political culture and personal ethos out of which a liberal, democratic politics could develop. Yet Michnik's own example shows that willingness to compromise must be both inspired, and constrained, by dedication to a particular sort of political ethics and political character. Compromise rests on a resolute commitment to a vision of politics – and will only work, in practice, if that resolution, as well as the flexibility which it inspires, is apparent.

Compromise, forgiveness, forbearance, and the acceptance of frustration and mess are all parts of the ethos and practice of “gray democracy”. For reasons and in terms reminiscent of Niebuhr, Michnik has defended the “chronically imperfect”, “sinful, corrupt and fragile” world of democracy – with its “mixture of sinfulness, saintliness, and monkey business” – with the reminder that “messiness is preferable to perfection, disorderly freedom in a state bounded by law to the orderly strong hand of a populist leader who ignores the law”.<sup>974</sup> This is an anti-utopian, even tragic, but not a morose or despairing view of democracy: “Democracy ... is born in pain, strengthened in conflict; it only shows its virtues after a long time”, and its “price” is a process of “risk, toil, and disappointment”.<sup>975</sup> Not only the process, but the goals of democracy are far from utopian: as Witold Gombrowicz said, the most important thing was “that the other man not bite me, spit on me, or torture me to death.” This is a vision very much in the tradition of what Shklar termed the “liberalism of fear” - a fear inspired by “an acute sense of hell”, and

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<sup>974</sup> LF 323, 325-6; Kaminski, “The Weekend Interview: From Solidarity to Democracy”.

<sup>975</sup> LP 61.

of the dark side of “man's excessive dynamism”.<sup>976</sup> This frame of reference has made Michnik a resiliently buoyant observer of democracy's birth-pangs. When one has a vivid imagination, fed by direct experience and memory, of the worst, the imperfections of “ordinary” democracy seem less troubling. This frame of reference may, on occasion, make Michnik overly sanguine about the ills and evils of society. But a memory of just how bad things can get – and how they can come to be that way – remains a useful, even a necessary, component in the political imaginations of democratic citizens and activists.

There is also a need to prevent memory from becoming nostalgia – or modest acceptance of imperfection, complacency. Although the moral world of liberal democracy is “gray”, while that of totalitarianism is “black and white”, it would be wrong to conclude that the latter is simpler. The struggle between good and evil can be as fraught with ambiguity and the risk of corruption as the endless negotiations of democracy. Nor is the latter morally undemanding – on the contrary, it requires its own forms of integrity and fortitude.

### **E. Conclusion**

While it is easy to be struck with admiration by the eloquence, brilliance and humanity of Michnik's writing and the courage and canniness of his action, and to be impressed by his contribution to a political movement that did much to transform the world, we should also be alert to the tensions within his position. In doing so, we are preceded by Michnik himself, who has grappled with the seemingly contradictory, yet not wholly separable, demands of politics and morality. Through the confrontation between the failed, aristocratic liberal revolutionary Count Altamira and Julien Sorel in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, Michnik sketches the different

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<sup>976</sup> LF 85.

outlooks (the *ethe*) of the morally scrupulous political idealist who refrains from ruthless action – who refuses to compromise ideals – and loses; and the “realist”, inspired to transform the world by a mix of moral passion and resentment, who will compromise principles but not concede on goals, and will not stop at any means – because, as Julien says, “The man who desires a goal, also desires the way of accomplishing it.” To Julien, the idealists are “arrogant children ... mere talkers”; their refusal to compromise their ideals by “committing crimes” means they are “swept away”, and the people remain enslaved. Michnik, we might expect, is more attracted to Altamira than Sorel; but he seems to agree with this diagnosis. Altamira – like other *liberal* revolutionaries – “did not cut off his enemies’ heads; he rejected violence; he did not want to kill. That is why he lost.”<sup>977</sup> Michnik is not simply on Altamira's side, or on Julien Sorel's. He writes to, and for, those who cannot abandon the passion for justice – and who feel the resentment and desire for vengeance with which this idealistic passion is so often entangled – but who at the same time are afraid of the tendency of a passion for justice and vengeance to become homicidal.

Michnik is thus sharply aware of the basic tension between realism and idealism, innocence and experience, in thinking about politics – but with a wrinkle. Political engagement – or, at least, “realistic”, forceful political action that has a good chance of success – in modern democracies often stands opposed to certain human qualities that are admirable and lovable from a non-political perspective – and which can be valuable in public life as well. Individual integrity which demands maintaining independence of movements and sects, generosity and moral scruple in dealing with opponents, loyalty to friends, and an irony which is incompatible with

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<sup>977</sup> *The Trouble with History*, 162-3, 164-5.

the “vulgarity, dirt, and Manichaenism of the world of politics” with its “one-dimensionality and inescapable fanaticism”.<sup>978</sup> (Note here that Manicheanism now forms part of the “impure” world of political struggle, as opposed to a more morally “pure” stance of even-handedness and friendship toward opponents). Yet more delicate moral sensibilities are not only intrinsically valuable, they are also sometimes better guides to political action than pure power calculations. And if the goals of political struggle are the promotion of justice and freedom, the establishment of some level of decency in society and personal life, then “moral courage” and moral scruples cannot be safely dispensed with.

Therefore, while Michnik sometimes depicts moral witness and hard-headed pragmatism as each being an appropriate and adequate mode for different sorts of situations, his work also points to the fact that – as he sometimes acknowledges, and as his own example itself suggests – things are not quite so clear-cut: there is a need for, and also dangers to, both “realistic” pragmatism, and moral scrupulousness (or intransigence) both in more drastic or “heroic” situations of conflict, and in prosaic democratic politics. It is the duty of the politician to “maintain balance”, to mediate between the interests and demands of various factions while protecting basic human rights and fair political procedures – and to combine and balance “both the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility”.<sup>979</sup> For all of the differences in their roles, the intellectual, the activist, the democratic citizen must also attempt to do so. But it cannot be an easy or tranquil balance, and still be true to reality and responsive to the voice of morality, which

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<sup>978</sup> LF 11, 15.

<sup>979</sup> *The Trouble with History*, 23, 28.



should not drown out the demands of politics, but should not be silenced by them either.<sup>980</sup>

Michnik stresses these tensions; he insists on the importance of confronting them and developing some practical response – but he does not offer any easy answers. That is part of the point of his work. Michnik, like Stendhal (and Niebuhr, and – through proxies – Berlin), enacts a dialog with himself. He certainly does not shy away from preaching, from indicating dangers and, through understanding of the dangers, a correct path. But he also seeks to do justice – and to show how one might do justice – to the difficulties, the real conflicts between the genuine virtues and valid claims of realism and idealism, while at the same time recognizing the pathologies and dangers of each. We have seen this manifestation of inner struggle – this attempt, at once, to work through inner struggles to a wiser perspective, without embracing a false synthesis – in Weber, Niebuhr, and Berlin. But the process is often sharper in Michnik's work, because as someone who unites the perspectives of the activist, the independent but engaged moralist, and the detached skeptic to a more intense degree than the others, he feels the conflicting pulls particularly sharply – and cannot, for all his seemingly sanguine celebration of the “beautiful” grayness of democracy, find any rest (including even the rest in tragic resignation flirted with by Weber, or in anti-heroic embrace of irresolution and compromise for the sake of “decency” advocated by Berlin).

A significant part of Michnik's achievement as political activist, intellectual, journalist, and scholar – one which has relevance, I believe, beyond the particular Polish context which has formed him and which he has helped to form – has been the way in which he has reflected on, and shown, how to combine Weber's two ethics in a single character and career. Michnik

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<sup>980</sup> cf. *ibid.*, 24-5.

exemplifies the combination at which Weber fleetingly gestured – the “mature” political actor who is able to bring together the dispositions and sense of his political role involved in an ethic of responsibility, and the personal integrity and courage of the ethic of conviction. More than this, he has both explored in theory, and shown in action, how this combination may be sustained in practice, while also acknowledging its difficulty and internal tensions. Like Niebuhr and Berlin, he has recognized the importance of accepting conflict, imperfection, human fallibility and loss, while sustaining an idealism that seeks to mitigate suffering and achieve a greater degree of justice and freedom; and of combining qualities of integrity and humility, irony (or humor) and moral seriousness, moderation and attentiveness to the flaws and gaps in any balance, compromise or consensus that may be reached. And his example suggests not only how one might go about pursuing the ethical path and spirit of a tempered liberalism, but that such a liberalism may – with skill, dedication, courage, and luck – prove both more effective (and more constructive, in achieving sweeping changes in human life) than a simpler, more ruthless and less restrained path of “realism”; and more noble and inspiring than the purity of the “angel.”

### **Conclusion: Realism, Ethics, Ethos, and a Reconstructed Liberalism**

*Virtue cannot separate itself from reality without becoming a principle of evil. Nor can it identify itself completely with reality without denying itself ... Moderation ... teaches us that at least one part of realism is necessary to every ethic: pure and unadulterated virtue is homicidal. And one part of ethics is necessary to all realism: cynicism is homicidal.*<sup>981</sup>

*One should just as little strive to defend one's principles by surrendering them, as to defend one's life by sacrificing what gives that life content and purpose.*<sup>982</sup>

*He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster.*<sup>983</sup>

The main themes that have structured and motivated this account are, to reiterate: 1) the problems of political ethics; or, the conflict between the voices (the plural is important) of morality and political expediency that arise when moral idealism confronts the realities of deep disagreement and human recalcitrance, and of political violence, tyranny and terror; 2) the particular challenges for, and transformations within, liberalism when it comes to grapple with these political realities and these ethical problems; and 3) the idea of, and role played in ideological conflict and ethical reflection by, ethos. I have tied these themes together by presenting a three-pronged argument: 1) that in the twentieth century liberalism faced – and continues to periodically face – a particular political-ethical predicament; 2) that reflection on the role of ethos in political life, and the cultivation of a particular ethos, matters to the defense of liberalism in the face of this predicament; and 3) that the history of both political thought broadly, and the development of liberalism, in the twentieth century was marked by the formulation of a *particular* ethos of liberalism, reflecting appreciation of the importance of ethos

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<sup>981</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 296-7.

<sup>982</sup> Karl Kautsky, *Terrorism and Communism* (1919), quoted Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*, 108-9.

<sup>983</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 146.

to the quality of politics, of the danger presented by anti-liberal conceptions of political ethics and ethos, and of the demands and dangers inherent in politics

The preceding chapters have been largely concerned with tracing, or extracting, these themes, and making this case, through a set of historical challenges and individual visions. I will now seek to sum up, and draw some lessons from, the discussion of the liberal response to the ethical challenge of anti-liberalism, as I have reconstructed it here. In doing so, I shall bring my account into more direct conversation with concerns that have preoccupied political theorists in recent years, and seek to situate the position I stake out here within the larger landscape of recent political theory. Among other things, I will have something to say about where the “tempered liberalism” reconstructed here stands in relation to recent formulations of liberal theory, and to the recent critiques of liberal theory by proponents of the “new realism”.<sup>984</sup> I shall also respond to recent debates revolving around the question of whether liberalism should be conceived, by its analysts and defenders, in “institutional” or “ethical” terms. (The obvious answer is, “both”; but since political theory tends to thrive on the assertion of half-truths as clarifying correctives to other half-truths, I will present a more pointed defense of articulating liberalism in “ethical” terms.)

### **I. Morality, Ruthlessness, Dirty Hands, and the “Liberal Predicament”**

First, to recap some major features of the story up to now. We have seen liberalism confronted with challenges, which we may (crudely) distinguish as practical and theoretical. I have sought to sum-up the main practical challenge in terms of what I have labeled the “liberal

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<sup>984</sup> Here I shall refer to the work of, *inter alia*, Richard Bellamy, William Connolly, John Dunn, Bonnie Honig, Raymond Geuss, John Gray, Geoffrey Hawthorn, Chantal Mouffe, Glen Newey, Mark Philp, Marc Stears, James Tully, Jeremy Waldron and Bernard Williams as the “new realism”, to distinguish it from the various forms of “realism” already discussed here (as well as from “realism” and “neo-realism” in international relations theory).

predicament”. This is the predicament liberals find themselves in when confronted by opponents who wholly reject the constraints that principled liberals seek to impose upon, and the scruples they feel about, political action – who reject, that is, liberal ways of acting, judging, and *being* in politics. This predicament assumes the appearance of a dilemma based, first, on the reasonable fear that, if liberals remain true to basic norms of liberalism, they will suffer political defeat – and those ends which liberalism aims to achieve (e.g. the claims to liberty, dignity, respect, fair legal process, and security from violence, terror and humiliation for all members of society) will be lost. But, on the other hand (or, the other horn of the dilemma), if they do not remain true to liberal norms, it is feared that liberals run the very real risk of destroying what they seek to save in the process of seeking to save it – falling (gradually or suddenly) into acts as harsh and destructive, and attitudes as ruthless, as those of their opponents.

Here we confront the familiar problem of dirty hands – with the important point being that, on the one hand, refusal to dirty one's hands may still involve one in guilt (in the form of failing to achieve those ends – or safeguard those rights – one regards as morally obligatory); and on the other, that dirtying one's hands involves not merely personal guilt or corruption, but the undermining of that which justified<sup>985</sup> the hand-dirtying to begin with.

The “theoretical” challenges are related to the practical challenge in two ways. First, they inspire the sorts of political conduct – the rejection of liberalism's attempt to subject political action to legal and ethical limitation – that produce the “liberal predicament”. Second, they discourage the sorts of thinking about the ethics of political action that allow one to perceive the “liberal predicament”: they deny the persistence of deep ethical dilemmas or conflicts in politics.

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<sup>985</sup> Or, let us say, which offered a *prima facie* justification.

These theoretical lines of challenge point, in their different ways, to attitudes and actions marked by ruthlessness. First, there is the clear rationale and inspiration for ruthlessness presented by what I have termed *end-maximalism*. Such an approach rejects the idea of valid constraints on the attempt to realize some one ultimate end or set of ends regarded as being absolutely vital, essential, obligatory, important – whether these constraints are suggested by scruples about means, or concern with ends other than the ultimate one. What is more, this way of thinking rejects half-measures and partial achievements: the end must be realized *fully*, and action should pursue the most efficient path to this achievement.<sup>986</sup>

Such end-maximalism often involves a combination of moral absolutism with a hard-headed “realism” about action: idealism inspires ardent dedication to the end, while cold calculation of what is required to succeed in its pursuit justifies cynical and brutal conduct. This is a particularly interesting phenomenon – and a particularly widespread one in the history I have been recounting. The so-called “realist” element here is worth distinguishing, and reconstructing in isolation, because it has played a role in inspiring ruthlessness among those who are not end-maximalists. Actually, “realism” as I initially explicated the term encompasses both elements distinct from end-maximalism, and a type of end-maximalism distinct from the *moral* end-maximalism with which I have been largely concerned. This latter sort of realism posits, as the proper end of politics, the securing of power – for the individual, or the party, or the state. Power may be valued as an instrument to other things, but it is on this view also posited as the end of politics distinct from any particular further end. But “realism” can also involve at least two other – albeit, often connected – views of politics. One is more purely descriptive: it simply holds that,

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<sup>986</sup> Here trade-offs may be acknowledged – and disagreements may revolve around the relative importance – between rapidity and completeness of achievement. End-maximalism can allow such disputes, but few others.

in order to succeed in politics, one will often have to act in ways that are “ruthless” in the sense of ignoring or defying moral standards. The final sort of “realism” is more “ethical” in the sense of being oriented around a particular conception of character – one that is astute, clear-eyed, harsh, decisive, disillusioned, cunning. Such an ideal of character – rather than any particular end, or principle of conduct– is normative for politics.

Starkly opposed to “realism” is what I have termed moral “purism”. This, too, takes more than one form: it encompasses both approach that prioritizes safeguarding the purity of the agent's character and actions (purism about conduct); and an approach that seeks to eliminate corruption and evil from political life (purism about ends). The aspiration to purify politics – to sweep away all that is wicked and rotten – also tends to ruthlessness, insofar as it generally amounts to end-maximalism. It may, however, avoid this, by insisting on the homogeneity of means and ends: on this view, the only way to achieve a purified world is to act purely, or to be pure. Purism about ends and means are then unified. But this is a very difficult position to maintain in an impure world (as Lukacs's case suggests). And maintaining purity can itself become a form of ruthlessness: one will often have to ruthlessly sacrifice the interests, even the lives, of others, refusing to do what is needed to help them for fear of dirtying one's immaculate hands. (And how immaculately clean are one's hands, really, then?)

These different routes to ruthlessness have certain commonalities. First, both “purism”, and many variants of realism, and absolutism and extremism about ends, reflect an aspiration to some sort of purification – and simplification – of political and ethical life; all aim at some form of “pure” politics. And all suggest that the ethical position implicit in many forms of liberalism is incoherent. The institutional and ethical constraints adopted by liberalism interfere with the

efficient pursuit and, often, the achievement of desirable goals – whether the goal desired is justice or power. Liberal politics is beset by compromise and confusion– and so are the rationales advanced by liberals. Liberal politics – and the sort of individuals it appeals to and produces – is mediocre and venal. It is a realm of alienation and diremption, muddle and temporizing. Liberals must properly justify and act so as to attain their ends – or they should shut up and get out of the way.<sup>987</sup>

The authors to whom I have devoted extended attention – Weber, Niebuhr, Berlin, Michnik – as well as others who have made briefer appearances, have recognized and rejected the different sorts and sources of ruthlessness sketched above – which, as they have stressed to varying degrees, are also examples of extremism or immoderation, and irresponsibility. They have sought to avoid *all* conceptions of “pure” politics, so as to keep politics from becoming too terribly dirty – dirty, not with compromise and venality, but with blood and ashes.

They have also turned to ethos – either redefining liberalism itself in terms of a particular conception of politics, spirit of political activity, and set of dispositions and sensibilities; or suggesting that liberalism points to or relies upon such an ethos. While they have varied in how explicitly or consciously they have turned to ethos, and how far they have been willing to prescribe a single ethos for political action, they all share this “ethical” orientation, in contrast to other approaches to thinking about politics. This has been one reason why their work has appeared puzzling or unsatisfactory to many.<sup>988</sup>

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<sup>987</sup> While I have formulated these criticisms in terms of liberalism, it should be stressed that they can be directed at all forms of politics that take a similar, “moderate” ethical stance regarding politics.

<sup>988</sup> A recent expression of such dissatisfaction (in this case, with Berlin) is presented in Jeremy Waldron: “Isaiah Berlin’s Neglect of Enlightenment Constitutionalism”, available online at [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2410388](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2410388).



Of those who responded to the anti-liberal challenge and the liberal predicament, not all turned to ethos; and those who did, did not all embrace the same sort of ethos. But my concern here has been with those who both responded to the ethical challenges confronting liberalism in the twentieth century by turning their attention to ethos, and who articulated variations on a particular ethos; the general ethos-centered approach, the affirmation of liberalism combined with a chastening of certain liberal hopes and assumptions, and the particular ethos (or cluster of ethos) that they articulated and exemplified were the defining features of *tempered liberalism*.

## **II. A Liberalism without Illusions? Tempered Liberalism and the Liberal Landscape**

“Tempered liberalism” identifies a subset of liberal theories and outlooks; this subset overlaps with numerous other subsets of liberalism. Tempered liberalism is liberalism marked by – and which orients itself around – a particular ethos and sensibility, which it combines with and brings to bear on a liberal political theory, and the political project that follows from that theory. As such, it does not present an alternative moral doctrine, justification, or theory of justice (or, for that matter, of society or political dynamics) to other forms of liberalism. It can, to some extent, be combined with them (though this will involve a certain amount of alteration); it can also be seen as simply involving a different sort of activity.<sup>989</sup> Nevertheless, this strain of liberalism – one that I believe can take inspiration from Weber, and is typified by Niebuhr, Berlin, and Michnik – does involve a certain conception of politics, as well as certain features of disposition and sensibility.

Tempered liberalism sees disagreement and conflict as endemic to human society; but

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<sup>989</sup> Cf. Jonathan Allen, “The Place of Negative Morality in Political Theory”, 349-50. Allen expands on this element of “tempered liberalism” within an intellectual framework strikingly similar to my own: he identifies what he terms “negative morality” a feature of disposition, “a sensibility or ethos”, irreducible to doctrine, which guides *the way* in which theories and political positions are held (ibid 349, 359, 361n.25) .

also holds some forms or expressions of conflict to be preferable to others, and believes that it is possible (if difficult) to make mediated, constrained forms of conflict normative for (and, ideally, the norm of) political life.<sup>990</sup> In stressing conflict, tempered liberalism is not unique among the various strains of liberal thought. Conflicts based on interests, allegiances and beliefs have been a persistent theme in liberal theory. Many classical liberals hoped to channel conflict, to make it peaceful and productive, through the design or adoption of institutions, the arrangement of incentives to promote some sorts of conflict and discourage others. This management of incentives required going beyond mere institutional design, to the fostering of a particular sort of public culture, the revaluing of social values. The hope was that, in this way, social unrest could be discouraged and reduced through the exercise of freedom rather than repression.<sup>991</sup>

Experience made post-war liberals less hopeful about the power of rational self-interest to overcome irrational passions, and produce a balance of beneficial competition and cooperation. At the same time, confrontation with both the rejection of limits on the conduct of conflict, and aspirations to the ultimate elimination of conflict, renewed these liberals' commitment to both affirming conflict, and insisting on limits to it. The thinkers studied here concluded that properly incorporating ethical pluralism and political conflict required more than institutional design. The attempt to come to terms with conflict, and to articulate (and practice) a particular sort of political ethos, were parts of a single project. The ethos of tempered liberalism

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<sup>990</sup> This leaves vague how constrained this conflict is (or, how this conflict is to be constrained); I return to this point below, in the discussion of the relationship between liberalism and the 'new realism'.

<sup>991</sup> For the "pre-history" of this tendency, see Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton University Press, 1977). For recent discussions of liberal theory highlighting the role of conflict, see Stephen Holmes, *Passions and Constraint: On the Theory of Liberal Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 1995); Brandon P. Turner, *Antagonism in the Liberal Tradition*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008; Andrew Sabl, "Strategy: Liberal Realism in Politics," Working Paper, academia.edu, 24 February 2014.

thus sought to safeguard against both the tendency to denigrate and seek to eliminate conflict, and the pathologies of unchecked conflict.

Closely related to this way of thinking about conflict is tempered liberalism's belief that human beings will always be imperfectly rational, benevolent, and self-disciplined at best: enmity, partiality, selfishness, rancor, competition, vengeance, and intolerance will always be with us. But these, too, can be mitigated, balanced, and disciplined or directed to some degree. This same balance of tempered pessimism and chastened hope also comes into play in assessing the prospects for reducing suffering. We can never be wholly saved from the harm and pain which we inflict upon ourselves and have inflicted upon us; but laws, distributive policies, and sentiments *can* be made somewhat more enlightened – on the whole – so that the incidence and intensity of suffering are lessened. All of these alleviations of the inherent ills of human life are, however, possible rather than inevitable (or even likely).

Tempered liberalism is also “humanistic”, tolerant, individualistic, egalitarian, and emancipatory. Its goals are to lessen human suffering, to extend the freedom individuals enjoy to live their lives in ways that they determine to be good, to encourage and allow for a great deal of variety in human lives and characters, and to sustain relations of peace, mutual forbearance and respect among members of society. This – combined with a sense of the difficulty of achieving these goals – provides the impetus to political deliberation and action among tempered liberals. At the same time, their awareness of the ways in which well-intentioned action can go wrong leads to a further chastening of hopes – and acceptance that there not only are practical limits to what they can achieve, but should be normative constraints on what they can do.

This overall perspective is what led the thinkers studied here, and many of their admirers

and fellow-travelers, to be identified as “non-utopian” or “anti-utopian”. This certainly conveys an important feature of their self-conception, and the way in which they regarded politics. But I have avoided stressing this dimension too prominently for two reasons. First, it tends to reflect a broader view of what constitutes “utopian” political thinking than I have sought to work with here.<sup>992</sup> And even if one understands utopianism more broadly, identifying proponents of a tempered liberalism as anti-utopian only gets at one dimension of their multifaceted thought – one political pathology, among several, that they defined themselves against and sought to discourage. Second, this characterization tends to focus attention on the ends politics can achieve – and thus, draws attention away from the dimension of ethos. Nevertheless, an account of the ethos of tempered liberalism should include the *anti-utopian temper* of this strain of liberalism: its tendency to keep hope chastened, aspirations modest, and political thought focused more on protecting against evils and addressing immediate problems. This anti-utopianism in outlook is thus also connected to what I have identified as a “prophylactic” approach to political thinking. Going further, one might say that this liberalism is (moderately) *tragic* in perspective, attuned to imperfection and conscious of painful loss.<sup>993</sup> Tempered liberalism is not necessarily fatalistic or despairing (as Weber, for example, often was); but it does approach politics with a chastened, moderately pessimistic, cautious, and “prophylactic” stance. This sort of liberalism certainly eschews preoccupation with “ideal theory” – not because it necessarily holds such theory to be useless or wrong-headed, but because its interests lie elsewhere. Its pessimism and its pluralism prevent it from identifying any one conception of “the good life”, or taking such a conception as

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<sup>992</sup> See pages 19-20 above.

<sup>993</sup> On this see Allen, “The Place of Negative Morality”.

the orientation for political thought. It does have a conception of a good society, but this is generally a fairly stripped-down one defined above all by the avoidance of extremes of suffering, cruelty, oppression, injustice, and humiliation.

Tempered liberals depart from much recent normative liberal theory in their *approach* to the activity of political theory. As I have noted (though not always in such terms), the thinkers on whom I have focused have seen political theory as *phenomenological*, *therapeutic*, above all *educational*, rather than as *justificatory* or *architectonic*. That is, they seek, first, to achieve a sensitive, subtle, thick understanding of “the moral and political world and the dispositions, passions, and experiences that recur in that world”, as well as the “possible consequences for politics” of these dispositions.<sup>994</sup> Second, they seek to convey this understanding to an audience of fellow political actors, thereby sensitizing their audience to certain important (and often complex, ambiguous, or paradoxical) features of the world – in the hope that their readers (or auditors) may thereby be encouraged and enabled to act more thoughtfully, wisely, and well.<sup>995</sup>

In both its assumptions and approach, this liberalism has very strong affinities with Judith Shklar's “liberalism of fear”. The liberalism of fear, is geared towards “damage control”, is guided by psychological sensitivity and a sense of history (or “memory”); for all its “realism”, it also has a strong ethical conscience, which seeks to render “a human verdict on human conduct”.<sup>996</sup> (There is also a certain affinity between Shklar's method of “telling stories”, and the

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<sup>994</sup> Ibid, 344-5.

<sup>995</sup> On the idea of educative political theory as concerned with sensitizing our perceptions, see *ibid*, 352

<sup>996</sup> Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear”, *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, 8-9; *idem.*, *Ordinary Vices* (Harvard University Press, 1984), 9.

method, practiced here, of painting portraits.<sup>997</sup>) Shklar can be considered among the ranks of “tempered liberals”. But not all tempered liberals are so stringent as she was in regarding cruelty and the fear of cruelty as *the “summum malum”*, prevention of which political effort should always prioritize.<sup>998</sup> Nor did they all share her robust rejection of the Machiavellian (and Weberian) view of politics as requiring great leaders to depart from personal morality in the name of political responsibility. Connected to this, Shklar was more inclined to look to institutionalist solutions than to “ethical” ones, even as she acknowledged the ethical basis, and demandingness, of liberalism.<sup>999</sup> Shklar did not share the concern with statesmanship and focus on political leaders that marked the outlooks of Weber, Niebuhr, and Berlin: she spoke for those who (to use a Machiavellian formulation) fear being ruled, rather than desiring to rule.<sup>1000</sup> But the difference is not complete. The other tempered liberals discussed here were concerned with both of Machiavelli's types; to varying extents they sought to speak *to* those who desire to rule, but *for* those who fear domination –and praised those leaders whose desire for power was tempered and constrained.

Tempered liberalism's departures from recent liberal theory as represented by e.g. John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin may seem to bring it into line with those recent attacks on “high liberalism” (to borrow a label from William Galston) that are now often grouped together under

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<sup>997</sup> See *Ordinary Vices*, 230.

<sup>998</sup> “The Liberalism of Fear”, 10-11; Shklar here explicitly notes that her “liberalism of fear” does not rest on pluralism.

<sup>999</sup> See *Ordinary Vices*, 22-3, 242-5 (for a biting critique of Weber and preoccupation with “dirty hands”); Shklar, *Montesquieu* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 51-2. For commentary, see Katrina Forrester, “Judith Shklar, Bernard Williams and Political Realism”, *European Journal of Political Theory* 11:3 (2012), 247-72, especially 253-5.

<sup>1000</sup> See e.g. “The Liberalism of Fear”, 9-10.

the label realism – what I will term “the new realism”.<sup>1001</sup> At the same time, I have depicted tempered liberalism as a response to attacks on liberalism by, among others, proponents of “realism”. This raises the question of how the story I have told relates to contemporary disputes between realists and liberals. But to bring my account into conversation with these recent debates is a thorny task – partly because it remains unclear where the new realism stands in relation to liberalism. To the extent that the new realism does constitute a critique of liberalism,<sup>1002</sup> it is not always clear exactly what this critique is – or, which aspects of (what) liberal theory it aims at, and which it hits.

To some extent, the new realism is not relevant to the story told here: it addresses different targets, and different issues, than those involved in the anti-liberal critique of liberalism and the tempered liberal response. The new realism represents a reaction against the method, ambitions, and conclusions of “high liberalism” in the name of a more contextual method, guided by experience and prudence, and on behalf of a less hopeful view of the degree of consensus it is possible to achieve (and a less demanding view of the degree and kind of consensus necessary for legitimacy). If we interpret the new realist attack on the “ethics first” approach to politics – the tendency to assert the “priority of the moral over the political”, to treat political theory as “applied ethics”<sup>1003</sup> – as a rejection of abstract, systematic moral theorizing which is divorced from and displaces prudence, there is an evident affinity between it and tempered liberalism, which agrees with many new realists that political reasoning should not

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<sup>1001</sup> Like many, I take as my starting-point in identifying the “new realism” the useful surveys by Galston (“Realism in Political Theory”, *European Journal of Political Theory* 9:4 [October 2010], 385-411) and Marc Stears (“Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion”, *British Journal of Political Science* 37:3 (July 2007), 533-53)

<sup>1002</sup> As asserted most clearly by Stears, 533.

<sup>1003</sup> Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, 2; Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* 1, 7-9.

“take the form of a practical syllogism” or a “deductive” process.<sup>1004</sup> The new realist critique of “liberalism” would then not seem to be directed against the concerns and claims of tempered liberalism.

It may however be replied that *any* liberalism is still going to insist on placing more stringent limits on political struggle, out of respect for individual freedom and claims to justification, than realists will allow; it may also be said that liberalism in all its forms is deeply wedded to a “moralistic” denial of the autonomy of politics from morality. But it is not clear that the new realism rejects ethical constraints on political action completely, or to a degree unacceptable to tempered liberals. Some new realists suggest that there are certain normative demands and criteria *inherent in* politics – which arise from the nature of politics itself, and not from any moral theory about the right or the good independent of politics. As Galston writes, “the core challenge of politics is to overcome anarchy without embracing tyranny”.<sup>1005</sup> Williams goes further, asserting that it is the essence of politics as such that those who rule “must have something to say *to each person* whom they constrain. If not, there will be people whom they are treating merely as enemies in the midst of their citizens”.<sup>1006</sup> But the idea that a political order must be capable of being justified to each of its subjects is often identified – by the new realist critique – as an essential mark of *liberalism*.<sup>1007</sup> Williams and other realists may disagree with Rawls on what counts as an adequate justification. But in insisting on the need for justification –

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<sup>1004</sup> Galston, 391; Mark Philp, *Political Conduct* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 4, 239.

<sup>1005</sup> Galston 391.

<sup>1006</sup> Williams, 5-6; see also *ibid* 13.

<sup>1007</sup> cf. Stears, 548, 552 (citing Waldron, ‘Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism’, *Philosophical Quarterly*, 37 (1987), 128.



and asserting that right must be distinguished from might – Williams incorporates a good deal of liberalism within his conception of the inherent norms of politics. For Williams, at least (as for Bernard Crick earlier<sup>1008</sup>) “politics” is defined in such a way as to incorporate certain liberal ideals from the start.

It may, however, be held that new realists depart from liberalism in asserting the preservation of order to be the first priority of politics.<sup>1009</sup> This represents a disagreement not only with high liberalism's identification of justice as the first virtue of political institutions, but also with the *pluralistic* view, typical of tempered liberals, that while order may be one of the basic priorities of political action, it may on occasion be sacrificed to other values, such as liberty or justice. Yet few of the new realists are willing to embrace authoritarianism in the name of order and stability. Indeed many, while acknowledging the need for basic conditions of order, embrace the *disorderly* nature of politics, its instability and the depth and fervor of its conflicts. For this “agonist” strain of realism, conflict is seen as not only a fact of life, but a school of character, bringing out the true essence of politics and the best in individuals.<sup>1010</sup> Tempered liberals also insist on open-endedness, the perpetuity and fertility of conflict. But they stress the burden of agonizing rather than the joys of agonism. Political conflict, they are at pains to insist, should be restricted to modes – and facets of life – that do not trespass too cruelly on individuals' freedom, equality, and dignity. The new realism is ambiguous between a *liberal* affirmation of conflict, which insists on conflict being constrained by institutional *and ethical* norms; a

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<sup>1008</sup> Crick, *In Defense of Politics* (1962). Crick is close to “tempered liberalism” in focusing on a set of “political virtues” – one which extensively overlaps with the ethos of liberalism I have presented.

<sup>1009</sup> See Galston 388; Williams, 3-4.

<sup>1010</sup> Cf. Stears, 545-6.

“Nietzschean” view which celebrates the very unruliness and freedom from moral norms of conflict (even if the weak and timid get a bit bruised); and a “Schmittian” view which assimilates political conflict to warfare – a no-holds-barred contest between implacable adversaries, each aiming at victory.

This ambiguity is particularly apparent in Stears's survey of “the politics of compulsion”, the genealogy of which includes the anti-liberalism of Nietzsche and Schmitt.<sup>1011</sup> But it sometimes appears, from Stears's and other accounts, that much new realism involves, to put it unkindly, a combination of Nietzschean swagger, with commitment to parliamentary-democratic norms which would have disgusted Nietzsche and Schmitt. Some new realists, at least, portray politics as “a strategic-communicative game in which citizens struggle for recognition and rule, negotiate within and sometimes over the rules, bargain, compromise, take two steps back, [and] start again.”<sup>1012</sup> Such a vision of politics does not present a challenge to the liberalism I have reconstructed here.<sup>1013</sup> Some new realists, either out of enthusiasm for the virtues of antagonism or out of despair at the ability of reason or morality to constrain power, accept a degree and type of coercion that any liberal would reject; but it is not clear that this is an essential part of the new realism.

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<sup>1011</sup> Stears 533-4.

<sup>1012</sup> Tully, “Agonic Freedom of Citizens”, quoted Stears 544.

<sup>1013</sup> Even when new realists go beyond the traditional norms of parliamentary democracy, many of the practices they hold out as exemplary remain closer to these norms than to the wholesale rejection of appeals to norms of justice, respect for others, individual rights and procedural fairness. Thus, when Stears writes that the protest tactics of the American Civil Rights movement involved “forms of protest and incivility that stand at *the opposite ends of the political spectrum* from the modes of engagement proposed by advocates of public reason” (Stears 551, emphasis added), he seems to reveal a blissfully constrained conception of the “political spectrum”. If the political spectrum is taken to run only from, say, the ideal propounded by some deliberative democrats to the practice of A. Philip Randolph, Ella Baker, James Farmer, Bayard Rustin and Whitney Young (or, for that matter, Saul Alinsky or Walter Reuther), then the tempered liberal's job is largely done; we are, at that point, a long way from Nietzsche, Schmitt, or Lenin.

This relates to two possible, but again ambiguous, divergences between liberal and new realist views on political ethics. There are two main points at issue here. The first concerns the question of whether politics is governed by its own norms distinct from those of personal morality or virtue. While this is a central claim of realism,<sup>1014</sup> some realists, on inspection, actually regard political and non-political life as *both* subject to competing ethical claims of purity integrity and expediency, “innocence” and “experience”. Others identified with the new realism either reject the division between public and private morality altogether, or insist that politics demands *higher* standards of integrity and conscientiousness than private life (in this, it should be noted, they often resemble some recent liberal theorists).<sup>1015</sup> To the extent that there is a disagreement between tempered liberals and *some* new realists, it consists in the former taking a more ambivalent, or nuanced, view of the relationship between private and public morality, a view that holds “public and private imperatives” to be neither always entirely opposed, “nor at one with each other” – and to both impose limits on agents simultaneously, regardless of the agent's role.<sup>1016</sup> This may reflect the fact that, with the notable exception of Weber (who aligns with many new realists on this point), many tempered liberals reject, and many new realists accept, a basically Kantian conception of morality: the opposition between morality and politics is premised on a stringent Kantian dichotomy between reason (and purified morality) and force. Tempered liberals do not adopt this stringent dichotomy, and therefore need not see politics as so

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<sup>1014</sup> See e.g. Galston 392.

<sup>1015</sup> See Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*; idem., “Public and Private Morality”, Williams, “Politics and Moral Character”, and Nagel, “Ruthlessness in Public Life” in Hampshire, ed., *Public and Private Morality*; Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* 242-5; Philp, *Political Conduct*.

<sup>1016</sup> Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 249.

essentially opposed to morality, and morality as so opposed to the give-and-take of politics.<sup>1017</sup>

The second element is how the relationship between ends and means is conceived. Stears points to the line of argument that the achievement of “liberal ends” may require, in the here-and-now, “compulsive means”. While tempered liberals will accept this affirmation of Weber's critique of “cosmic-ethical rationalism”, they will find it unsatisfactory in two respects. First, it does not address the way in which the use of “compulsive” means will leave a mark on the results achieved: arguing that we should adopt compulsive means for the sake of doing away with compulsion demands that we also render an account of how we propose to avoid letting the practice of compulsion take over. Means can devour the ends they seek to serve. Second, the argument is vague: “compulsion” covers a great deal. It can range from, for instance, enacting laws with which some citizens disagree, and using the coercive power of the state to enforce these laws against opposition; to sending anyone who questions a government's policy to the gulag. To argue simply about “compulsion” without specifying what sort or how much involves, first, a failure to make (or articulate) those discriminate judgments which, as Niebuhr stressed, frequently are *the* determinative judgments about politics; and to clarify the actual terms of debate and options under discussion.

The fear that the ruthless pursuit of moral ends will result in horrors is actually a motivation for many new realists.<sup>1018</sup> But, as I have suggested above, a look at the historical record suggests that matters are more complicated than the identification of political terror with utopianism or blind moralism. While certain sorts of “moralism” –a puristic desire to eliminate

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<sup>1017</sup> See Sabl, “Strategy”, 2; see also my discussion of Weber, above.

<sup>1018</sup> See particularly Galston, 395, 400-401.

all vice, an end-maximalist view that political reasoning is reducible to the identification of those end-results that are demanded by morality, and a pursuit of any means to those ends – have played a large role in inspiring moral-ideological ruthlessness, these elements have usually operated in combination with a “realist” view of politics as an arena of amoral struggle – and a consequent rejection of the “Kantian-priestly and vegetarian-Quaker prattle” of moralists. One sometimes hears the tonality of such anti-liberal polemics in the arguments of the new realists (when Raymond Geuss labels his position “neo-Leninism”, one must wonder where the attack on moralism is tending). If we are to adopt something like Geuss's injunction “*Respice finem*” – to look not just at what thinkers say, but at what they do, and what actions and ways of life their ideas point to (a view endorsed by Niebuhr, Berlin, and Michnik) – we may conclude that liberal moralism is preferable to the cocktail of Nietzsche, Weber, Lenin and Schmitt favored by some new realists.<sup>1019</sup>

This brings us back to what is, from my perspective here, the most significant point about the new realism: how far it is tied to an ethos of anti-liberal ruthlessness. I have suggested that, looked at in terms of a set of normative and methodological premises, and attitudes to political conflict, the new realism is ambiguous on this point: depending on how the nature or essence – and hence the internal normative demands – of politics are understood, it may be an encouragement or an antidote to ruthlessness, and may be congruent or contradictory to basic (as opposed to “high”) liberal commitments. But one can also see the new realism as expressing a particular political ethos, and a particular intellectual ethic – or intellectual aesthetic: one which despises muddle and waffle, sentimentality and naivete, and anything that smacks of sanctimony.

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<sup>1019</sup> Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 10, 25-9, 99.

It insists on facing hard truths – and celebrates a hard-boiled attitude that accepts harsh realities.

Such an outlook can serve as a vital tonic, a protection against dangerous and foolish delusions. But there is a danger – recognized by Niebuhr, Berlin, and Michnik – that the (supposedly) dispassionate recognition of harsh realities actually reflects, or fosters, an affirmation of harshness, giving rise not to an embrace of ruthless action. And there is a danger of sliding further, from “celebration of the 'toughmindedness' or realism required to confront the presence of violence” into “a desire for a 'cleansing' or rectificatory violence”.<sup>1020</sup> As Williams has argued, we may not want political actors to cultivate too harshly “realistic” a set of dispositions, even if we demand that they make realistic estimations of the demands of politics – and, in some cases, violate “moral” prohibitions for the sake of political goals.<sup>1021</sup>

The rejection of the hard-boiled exaltation of political hardness that underwrites (some) realism may be linked to a “methodological” point: the turning of attention to ethos itself. Insofar as it not only articulates a certain ethos, but enjoins paying attention to ethos, tempered liberalism responds to the realist's invocation of Lenin's “who whom?” as the essential question of politics by asking “who *how*?” This strikes me as preferable, both because it gets at a fuller, more nuanced account of reality; and because the “who whom?” framework seems to me to push towards an approach that is *ad hominem* in a negative sense, where our evaluations of the relative merits of the “whos” and ‘whoms’ overrides perceptions of the nuances of, and scruples about the decency, of the “hows”.

### **III. Good Characters for Good Liberals?: Ethos and the Reconstruction of Liberalism**

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<sup>1020</sup> Allen, “The Place of Negative Morality”, 358; cf. the discussion of the dangers of Nietzsche's commitment to “honesty” in Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 223-4

<sup>1021</sup> Williams, “Politics and Moral Character”; I return to this point further below.

I return, then, to the case for looking at ethos. There are three objections that I hope to answer: 1) that political theory should not concentrate on accounts of ethos; 2) that there is nothing specifically liberal about the ethos-centered approach, or the particular ethos, that I have presented; and 3) that my account is correct in connecting liberalism to the ethos I have presented, but that this is not a point in liberalism's favor. I will begin by reiterating the case for the importance of ethos more generally. I will then address the view that liberalism should be defined not by a particular ethos, but by purely institutional prescriptions. Then I will offer a summary of the main features of the ethos of tempered liberalism, before addressing some worries about this ethos.

#### **A. The Importance of Who We Are, and How We Do Things**

Political ethics looks to the conduct, character, and cultivated convictions of individual actors, as these arise in their involvement in political processes and pursuit of political objects. If “architectonic” political theory identifies what sort of political order we should seek, political ethics asks what we should and should not do and be(come) in pursuing that order. I have argued here that questions of political ethics played an important – often decisive – role in political thought and action in the twentieth century. This, combined with its evident practical relevance – the fact that we confront questions of political ethics in deciding how to live, day-to-day and year-to-year – should offer strong grounds for regarding political ethics as an important field of inquiry.<sup>1022</sup>

However, my claim goes further: I maintain not only that we should focus on political

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<sup>1022</sup> Which is not to say that we should neglect reflection on the character of institutions. Reflection on political ethics should ideally be integrated with such reflection – in part because it is plausible to think, as Aristotle suggested, that the character of the regime in question determines what counts as admirable or desirable in the character and conduct of citizens of the regime.

ethics, but that in doing so we should attend to matters of political ethos. There are two broad reasons for this, one of which has to do with my understanding of political ethics – or political action – broadly, while the other arises from my particular focus on the problem of ruthlessness in politics.

First, the most general point. Some awareness of and sensitivity to the ethos of individuals – and of movements, or for that matter whole political regimes – is vital to grasping the nature of political phenomena. Beyond institutions and discrete individual actions, character matters. An account that excluded description and analysis of political culture would not give a satisfactory sense of how different societies or movements wind up doing what they do; an account that excluded mention of the dispositions, sensibilities and outlooks of individuals would give an incomplete sense of the tenor and significance of their actions. This at least was the view of Niebuhr, Berlin, and Michnik, who believed that the spirit in which (liberal) goals were pursued was crucial to the achievement – or subverting – of those goals. A kindred point was made earlier by the Cambridge literary scholar F. L. Lucas. During the 1930s, Lucas was an outspoken opponent of Britain's policy of appeasement. He was also, as a literary critic, particularly concerned with and attuned to *style* as a window into the author's artistic vision and soul.<sup>1023</sup> In attacking appeasement, he accordingly zeroed-in on *the way* in which the policy had been undertaken, the *character* of the actors, tone of their pronouncements, and the tenor of their actions:

Even if what [Chamberlain] did were the right thing to do, this was not the way to do it... The surrender *might* have been necessary: the cant was not. Any statesman with a sense

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<sup>1023</sup> See Lucas, *Style: The Art of Writing Well* (1955). Lucas's interesting discussion of the relationship between style and character – which I cannot discuss here – reflects the clear influence of Aristotle's account of *ethos* in the *Rhetoric*.



of honour would at least have stilled that hysterical cheering and said: *My friends, for the present, we are out of danger. But remember that others, who trusted in us, are not. This is a day for relief, perhaps; but for sorrow also; for shame, not for reveling.* But this Chamberlain comes home beaming as fatuously as some country-cousin whom a couple of card-sharpers in the train have just allowed to win sixpence, to encourage him.<sup>1024</sup>

Not only cant, but hectoring and arrogance, can lead to the pursuit of bad policies – and can make the pursuit of potentially good policies ineffective, or counter-productive. In short, what matters is not only what policies we support, but *how* we think about them, how we think about and conduct ourselves in pursuing them; and the quality of how we conduct ourselves, in turn, will reflect the dispositions, sensibilities, and spirit that we bring to bear on political life.

This project as a whole has sought to furnish evidence of the importance of ethos. The central claim from which I launched the discussion was that ruthlessness (or, certain sorts of ruthlessness) was a striking feature of twentieth-century political thought and action. The phenomenon of ruthlessness, on examination, is a matter of the ethos of actors and their actions; and ruthless action has been inspired and justified by appeals to a conception of the appropriate ethos of political actors. An embrace of ruthless practice, in turn, has shaped the larger identities and judgment of political thinkers and activists, encouraging the affirmation and perpetuation of an ethos of ruthlessness that has fostered ever greater crime. I have also suggested, through my tempered liberal protagonists, that the antidote to ruthlessness is to be found in the cultivation of a particular sort of ethos.

Much the same arguments – and a larger view of ethics into which they fit – have been advanced by Bernard Williams. In his critique of the assumptions of “morality” (particularly utilitarianism), Williams stresses the point that actions can have psychologically transforming, or

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<sup>1024</sup> Lucas, *Journal Under the Terror, 1938* (Cassell, 1939), 277.

deforming, effects on the agent.<sup>1025</sup> So can adopting a particular attitude toward one's actions – or making a habit of acting in particular ways. Acting ruthlessly, even if it is an isolated incident, leaves an agent changed; determining to commit to ruthlessness as a habit or a policy will likely have effects on character that the agent will find hard to shake off. As Weber warned, we should be sensitive to what becomes of ourselves and our leaders in the course of political activity – for this will determine the shape and meaning of our own lives and actions, and will often have an effect on the larger fate of our political projects.

Williams has, further, argued that if we are to maintain a stance in and toward politics that avoids both self-indulgent self-righteousness and brutal cynicism (a point I return to below), citizens, and some politicians, must possess and sustain a certain sort of character, or set of dispositions and moral beliefs and sensibilities. These consist in the belief, or ethical proposition, that “there are actions which remain morally disagreeable even when politically justified”; and the disposition to care about the moral disagreeableness of actions, to feel guilty over morally disagreeable actions that they undertake, and to consider carefully both political responsibilities and the moral quality of actions. Such an ethos will make political actors think and feel scrupulously, *even if they ultimately violate some normal moral prohibitions*. And this is a vital safeguard, insofar as “Only those who are reluctant or disinclined to do the morally disagreeable when it is really necessary have much chance of not doing it when it is not necessary ... a habit of reluctance is an essential obstacle against the happy acceptance of the intolerable.”<sup>1026</sup>

In the course of his argument, Williams makes two particularly important points. The first

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<sup>1025</sup> See Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism”, in Williams and J. J. C. Smart, eds. *Utilitarian: For and Against* (Cambridge, 1973), especially 101, 106-7.

<sup>1026</sup> Williams, “Politics and Moral Character”, 64.

concerns the difference between the idea (or characteristic) of what I have termed ethos, and that of practical judgment. As we have seen, many of the authors discussed (particularly Weber and Berlin) have stressed the importance of good judgment – without offering a precise explanation of its nature. Williams proposes that the difficulties of explicating, and dangers of relying on, practical judgment arise from the fact that there simply is “no disposition which just consists in getting it right every time, whether in politics or anything else”. How well judgment is exercised depends on ethos – the “patterns of sentiment and reaction” of individuals, the “shared dispositions and .... mutual expectations” of deliberating groups – which may conduce to correct moral judgment, but are not identical to and do not guarantee it.<sup>1027</sup> Judging well is at least partly a matter of circumstance, or luck; but ethos can help or hurt the capacity for judgment.

The second significant point I want to draw from Williams is that the responses of reluctance and regret, the perception of moral obstacles and costs, of morally scrupulous political actors reflect *correct moral apprehension*.<sup>1028</sup> Such correct apprehension is important in itself, as we go about deciding which compromises and prices are acceptable in politics, and which are not. This view does not rest on or entail a wholesale rejection of consequentialism in contemplating and judging political actions; but it does constitute a rejection of *pure* consequentialism. On the view I want to draw out of Williams's essay – a view which, I believe, best fits the perspective of tempered liberalism (although few tempered liberals explicitly formulated it) consequences matter, but are not the only things that matter. The ethos that marks actors and their conduct is important because it shapes outcomes – indeed, it is itself constitutive

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<sup>1027</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1028</sup> Ibid., 65.

of what happens; but even if it does not produce good results, engaging in the fight well is – other things being equal – better than fighting dirty. The tough question arises when there seems to be a direct trade-off between living and acting well, and producing good outcomes. The arguments I have surveyed suggest that this is the case less often than “realists” might think – insofar that acting in (some sorts of) ethically deplorable ways will often have consequences, both immediate and longer-term, that will outweigh, block, or distort the achievement of desirable ends. This is not to say that we should always strive to keep our hands clean; but it does suggest we should be careful about when, for what reasons, and how much or in what way we dirty them – and should not give way to a “realist” inclination to think that the fact that a particular course of action involves hand-dirtying in itself makes it more likely to be successful, or that the fact of being ready to dirty one's hands should be taken as a point of pride or a sign of superior virtue (as Lukacs, the purist-turned-realist, suggested).

Ruthless mindsets and actions often produce abysmal results. The results are abysmal in part *because* of the embrace of an ethos marked by ruthlessness. But such an ethos would not be justified even if the results had not been abysmal, because it involved judgments, behavior, and ways of being that are always intrinsically, as well as often consequentially, worthy of condemnation. One possible conclusion – to which I am attracted, albeit with some hesitation – is that while the abysmal results of ruthlessness (e.g. poverty, hunger, the misery of parents watching their children starve and appealing fruitlessly to authorities) are always evils to be deplored and fought, there is an *added* element of evil when all of this horror is regarded as justified, when inflicting it is regarded as virtuous. And this for both intrinsic and consequentialist reasons: because the attitude is in itself abhorrent, and also tends to exacerbate

and perpetuate such suffering. This means that while we have a moral duty to avoid or put an end to such misery, we also have an additional duty to guard against justifications for such misery (whether the appeal comes from socialism or capitalism, Soviet power or American power).

There is a danger to this approach, too: the temptation to conclude that the fact that we do in fact feel scruples and guilt offers some sort of reduction of evil, if we do wind up doing evil. We should not let the fact that we feel guilty come, itself, to serve as an alibi for incurring guilt (as it did for Lukacs). The internal fate and bearing of actors matters – but it is not all that matters; *doing well* – or avoiding doing evil to others – matters too. (On this point Weber, and not Lukacs, seems to me to have got the balance roughly right.)

### **B. Liberalism: Ethical or Institutional?**

There is a more particular source of resistance to an “ethical” approach which connects the defense and practice of liberalism to thinking about, and cultivating, a certain ethos or *ethe*. This is the view that liberalism is, and should be, defined solely by commitment to certain political institutions and norms. The focus on institutions, and on principles that specify institutional arrangements and can be implemented through them, spans the divide between “moralists” and “realists”. An optimistic institutionalism suggests that if we get our principles right, clear prescriptions for institutions will follow; and once (or if) these are implemented, justice will thereby be served. On the other hand, some more “realistically” inclined thinkers also identify liberalism with modern constitutionalism, and celebrate it as such. On their view, it is because individual virtue cannot be relied upon to produce good political results that we

should turn to institutions – to subjecting the rule of persons to the rule of laws.<sup>1029</sup>

Distinguishing liberalism from civic republicanism, Nancy Rosenblum notes that the former is defined by “the predominance of institutional constraints over personal virtue as a guarantee of liberty ... Enumerating, delegating, and balancing power, liberal democracy binds not only government but also citizens' hands.”<sup>1030</sup>

The account of liberalism presented here thus challenges a predominant way in which liberalism has been formulated in recent years, by shifting attention from institutional design to matters of personal character and attitude. At the same time, I believe this view does not depart from – and the strain of liberalism which makes a focus on ethos central to its identity does not diverge from – the mainstream of liberal thought, a sizable body of which (more sizable than that which I can examine here) articulates and *endorses* or *prescribes* a set of personal dispositions, attitudes, habits of thought and perception; this activity, of articulating and educating a normative ethos for liberal society, has been at least as important as – and sometimes more important than – the establishment of norms governing institutional design and conduct.<sup>1031</sup> Modern constitutionalism – as many of its defenders have in fact realized – is

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<sup>1029</sup> See e.g. Shklar's discussion of Montesquieu (and Kant) in *Ordinary Vices*, 214-21, 233-7, 242, 244-5. This view can, in some cases, involve a mix of optimism and pessimism – pessimism about individual or collective virtue, and optimism about our ability to “outwit and outflank” defects of individual character (e.g. Jeremy Waldron, “Political Political Theory”, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 21:1 [2013], 1).

<sup>1030</sup> Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 290. Cf. Shklar's insistence that liberalism is a (narrowly) “political doctrine”, defined by commitment to “[l]imited and responsible government”, and “not a philosophy of life” or *Weltanschauung*. See “The Liberalism of Fear”, 1, 5, 10, 12-13, 18-19.

<sup>1031</sup> Take the example of Mill: while *On Liberty* may explicitly be concerned with persuading its reader to accept the harm principle as a guide to governmental policy, Mill is also centrally concerned with guarding against the dangers of social pressure – which are not adequately addressed by adopting the harm principle in matters of legislation. His tract thus advances an ideal of character, and seeks to cultivate, through exhortation, an ethos of independence, intellectual strenuousness, openness to variety and disagreement, and self-confidence and self-discipline in the reader.

itself an ethical project, which both relies on and fosters cultivation of a particular ethos.

This is a point recognized by some of the prime proponents of liberalism-as-modern-constitutionalism. While Jeremy Waldron may deride non-institutional political theory as not political at all, Shklar herself has led the way (down a path too seldom traversed by others) in approaching political theory – and the defense of liberalism – through attention to individual moral psychology. Her account of the liberalism of fear is itself, clearly, an account of a sensibility, sense of priorities, and set of dispositions. Elsewhere she acknowledges that liberalism is an “ethos”, and shows that it is both motivated and educated by attending to the psychology of human vices and vulnerabilities.<sup>1032</sup> Shklar, and kindred spirits such as Rosenblum and George Kateb, thus recognize that institutions both inculcate, and demand, certain types of character on the part of those who live under and act through them. Liberalism does have an ideal of virtue: that of the person who respects others “without condescension, arrogance, humility, or fear”; indeed, liberal politics “*depend* for their success on the efforts of such people”.<sup>1033</sup>

Liberalism does necessarily involve certain views of the structure and ends of political institutions: Shklar seems to me correct in asserting that Montaigne – who had in many ways a liberal sensibility – was nevertheless no liberal.<sup>1034</sup> What I want to insist on is that one can fail to be a liberal – or, rather, can be a liberal *badly* – if one affirms the institutions of liberalism, and not its spirit (which is itself, as Shklar stressed of liberalism's institutional principles, compatible

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<sup>1032</sup> See e.g. *Ordinary Vices* 248-9.

<sup>1033</sup> “The Liberalism of Fear”, 15. See also e.g. Kateb, *The Inner Ocean* (Cornell 1992), 36-76; Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton, 2008), 369-410.

<sup>1034</sup> “The Liberalism of Fear”, 5.

with a number of different doctrinal positions<sup>1035</sup>).

Objections may still be voiced by liberals – above all by chastened, or pessimistic, liberals: surely we cannot rely on the prevalence of a desirable ethos? And surely there is something paradoxical, and suspect, in liberalism – if we associate liberalism (as Berlin above all did) with an embrace of ethical pluralism – being identified with *a* particular ethos, however broad and inclusive this is? The first point is certainly valid: experience makes it all too apparent that we cannot depend on political actors exhibiting good ethos. But experience also suggests that in the absence of at least a significant body of political actors who can exhibit a liberal ethos at crucial moments, liberal institutions will be endangered, and will not in themselves be sufficient to combat the dangers. As Niebuhr pointed out, America's liberal constitutional structure was not enough to guard against McCarthyism; and ending the system of white supremacy in America required not just changes to the law, but action – and the right kind of action, action guided by and expressing a spirit of non-violence, determination, a mixture of pragmatism and integrity, and dignity – by individuals who were ready to go beyond the law. We can perhaps imagine perfect procedures, which could make judgment-and-ethos-guided action by individuals and movements a unnecessary (as Aristotle's imaginary machines would make slavery unnecessary); but thus far experience suggests that perfected institutional procedures and structures remain as imaginary as perfected human beings. If political theory is to be non-utopian, non-ideal – if it is to be, to borrow a phrase, “*political* political theory” - it must attend to extra-institutional matters of character, motivation, disposition – in short, ethos.

What of the problem of pluralism? As we saw in the case of Berlin, there is a certain

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<sup>1035</sup> See e.g. *ibid.*, 5-7, 13.



tension for those liberals who both affirm the validity and value of a variety of different, incompatible dispositions and temperaments – and associate the liberalism they advocate with a particular ethos. Here, again, matters are put well by a “liberal realist”, writing in Shklar's spirit:

Surely one thing liberalism means is a deliberate refusal to aspire to such mass conversions and mass indoctrination. On the contrary, good liberals ... value a diversity of behaviors, motivations, and human characters, often judging some better and some worse but deliberately fighting the temptation to buy moral reform at the cost of uniformity. What is at stake here is not the psychological point that changing one's attitudes is hard ... but a moral point: respect for others often entails restraining oneself from judging the state of others' souls, or at least from claiming the authority to change them.<sup>1036</sup>

This in itself, as Sabl notes, is “paradoxical”: it involves imposing upon oneself – *and* upon others, without whose collaboration in tolerance liberalism is unsustainable – rigorous demands: a self-disciplining spirit of tolerance, carefulness in judging, and self-criticism; and a “self-denying ordinance” against seeking to change others, or even judge them *too* harshly. Nevertheless, if one accepts the view that liberalism involves, not strict neutrality with regard to ideals of personal character,<sup>1037</sup> but a refusal to universally prescribe a single type of character, there seems to be a problem with the program of associating liberalism with the defense of a political ethos (or, the advocacy and promotion of some *ethos* over others).

There are in fact two problems here. One is the *liberal problem of pedagogy*: how to

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<sup>1036</sup> Sabl, “If You're Such a Liberal, How Come You Love Conformity?”, *Society* (March/April 2002), 81.

<sup>1037</sup> For the association of liberalism with neutrality, see Ronald Dworkin, “Liberalism”, in idem., *A Matter of Principle* (Harvard University Press, 1985), 181-204; on liberal neutrality as the distinctive mark of recent normative liberal theory see Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge University Press, 1987) 40-68; Will Kymlicka, “Liberal Individualism and Liberal Neutrality”, *Ethics* 99 (July 1989), 883-905; Jeremy Waldron, “Legislation and Moral Neutrality”, in idem., *Liberal Rights* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 143-67. There are a number of ways of understanding “liberal neutrality” advanced in these works and elsewhere. But, for the most part, they are concerned with neutrality about “what gives value to life” (Dworkin), rather than neutrality about personal character. Liberal theories may remain neutral in this sense, while still prescribing certain features of character on the part of citizens as necessary conditions for upholding just institutions (as in e.g. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, chapters 8 and 9).

reconcile the goal of fostering particular types of character and outlook with liberalism's opposition to what Shklar calls “the educative state” – that is, systematic and coercive attempts to deliberately inculcate certain ways of life and types of character. On this, the tempered liberalism that I have presented can fully accept Shklar's insistence that liberalism eschew a project of indoctrination. This leaves us – and Shklar – with a somewhat uneasy, but not unintelligible position: liberalism can insist that “if we want to promote political freedom, then this” – the conduct of individuals possessed of a liberal ethos – “is appropriate behavior”; but it should not seek to enforce such a character on everyone, or hold it up as a model of human perfection: while a “liberal character” may be imagined and fostered, “It is, however, by definition not to be forced or even promoted by the use of political authority.” As Shklar goes on to say, while this “does not render the tasks of liberalism any easier”, nor does it “undermine its ethical structure.”<sup>1038</sup> The tempered liberal project, as I have reconstructed it, agrees with this, but adds a further element: the effort to offer lessons in how to deal with and inhabit pluralism and freedom through means of *exemplification* as opposed to indoctrination.

The second problem is more properly the *problem of pluralism*: how to reconcile, intellectually, the recognition of the plurality of valid and worthwhile ways of being, with advocacy of a particular ethos. To this one can respond that the political ethos of tempered liberalism remains situation- and goal-specific. It is a (prophylactic) response to particular dangers that invariably arise in political life, and seriously threaten liberalism; it acknowledges that there are other dangers to be protected against, and that avoiding them will call for other ways of thinking and other qualities of character. This is not to say that the ethos of tempered

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<sup>1038</sup> “The Liberalism of Fear”, 15; *Ordinary Vices* 5.

liberalism can ever be wholly dispensed with – it is needed to protect against dangers that easily arise when fighting other evils – but it is not, and does not claim to be, the most important thing in all situations. Furthermore, tempered liberalism affirms not a single type of character or personality, but a range of them, different ones of which may be appropriate to different situations and roles. Thus Berlin appreciated both Turgenev and Herzen – and Roosevelt, Churchill, and Weizmann; and Michnik noted the value of the moralist, the skeptical intellectual, and the pragmatic activist. The tempered liberal ethos is broad and flexible enough to accommodate these different models at its “edges”. At the same time, it calls for the cultivation of a degree of balance – that individuals not dedicate themselves to perfecting the characteristics demanded by their particular “role”, but seek to balance these with other, contrary ones. The morally-inspired prophet, on this view, should maintain a modicum of hard-headed practical sense, and forgiving tolerance of human frailty; the humane “philanthropist” (or, in the title Michnik and other oppositionists preferred for themselves, “social worker”) should retain a degree of skepticism, irony, and acceptance of limitations; and the tough, pragmatic politician should cultivate the voice of scruple, moral sensitivity, and “innocent” idealism as more than fig-leaf.

### **C. Probity without Purity, Realism without Ruthlessness: The Ethos of Tempered Liberalism**

What, then, *are* the central elements of the ethos of tempered liberalism? While the authors I have discussed emphasize different features to different degrees, there are certain common characteristics that emerge from the ethical vision of each. These include both qualities often identified with “private” morality, or the virtues of “innocence” or idealism, and qualities identified with a “realist” morality of politics, the virtues of “experience”. Both sides of the

tempered liberal ethos are needed to safeguard against the various temptations to ruthlessness – and to reckless, irresponsible folly – on the part of political actors, which menace those subject to them.

Among the “realist” or “tough-minded” features of the liberal ethos are skepticism, directed against abstract formulae and speculative theory, ambitious programs, and claims to purity of intention and capacity to control events. This skepticism turns inward as well as outward, taking the form of fallibilism about beliefs, and a related tentativeness in making grand claims and prescriptions. As we have seen, this skepticism is also linked to an ironic and irreverent disposition; this reflects a sardonic recognition of the combination of human pretension and fallibility or frailty, an awareness of the uncertainty of our knowledge and the unpredictability that attends on our actions – and a recognition that we must nevertheless act, and do in fact act and judge based on beliefs about which we are uncertain. Irony imposes a certain practice of self-limitation;<sup>1039</sup> but it also frees us from a crushing sense of inadequacy; irreverence helps to maintain independence of judgment – and also reconciles individuals to the need for some authority, by allowing them to regard authority with amused tolerance rather than with an awe that is debasing, and easily disappointed.<sup>1040</sup>

The searching skepticism enjoined by tempered liberals is connected to an underlying sense of responsibility – both the responsibility incurred when we decide to engage in politics, and the responsibility we have to concern ourselves with the fate of our fellows, and therefore to engage in politics despite its hazards. A sense of responsibility, and of the complexity of political

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<sup>1039</sup> Cf. Goldfarb, *Beyond Glasnost*, 114: “Irony is a kind of self-limitation”.

<sup>1040</sup> On the value of a disposition of irreverence to liberal democracy see Scorza, *Strong Liberalism*, 134-61.

issues and the difficulty of action, encourages a practice of carefulness and thoughtfulness – an attempt to arrive at the fullest, most objective and balanced estimation of situations that we can achieve, to ponder the implications of our actions, and our own motivations in undertaking them – as well as the motivations, likely behavior, and claims of both allies and opponents.

The sense of responsibility – particularly of responsibility *for* the consequences of our action, and therefore of responsibility *to* take care in how we act – is itself a *moral* impulse. This sense of responsibility, and the humility and contrition stressed by Niebuhr and Michnik in particular, are connected not only to the “tough” or ‘realist” side of tempered liberalism, but also to its morally idealistic side. The sense of personal responsibility and the practice of self-examination are linked to the aspiration toward integrity or honor that plays such an important role in both motivating and constraining action for tempered liberals – and the courage, independence of judgment, and fortitude that such integrity, as understood by tempered liberals, demands. Weber, Niebuhr, Berlin and Michnik all stressed the need for courage – and also sought to inculcate their own, liberal, conceptions of courage. Shklar did the same, asserting that courage “is to be prized, since it both prevents us from being cruel, as cowards so often are, and fortifies us against fear from threats, both physical and moral. This is, to be sure, not the courage of the armed, but that of their likely victims.”<sup>1041</sup> To this one should add that there is also a need for a particular courage of the armed: a courage to refrain from using their arms when they can, but should not – a courage called for by Niebuhr and Berlin, and exhibited by Michnik.

Fortitude is also a virtue encouraged by tempered liberalism's (moderately) tragic view of life; and its commitment to tolerance – to letting others alone and respecting their decisions

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<sup>1041</sup> *Ordinary Vices*, 5; but see also *ibid* 14-15, 18-19, for warnings against romanticizing the victims.

about their own affairs – which requires that we master our tendencies toward disapproval, irritation, and the desire to step in and take control when others are making a mess of things. Liberal fortitude is thus a matter, in many cases, of exercising forbearance. The presence of internal checks and the recognition of the need for limits is particularly important in guarding against the perversion of either idealism or realism into ruthlessness. Political actors cannot navigate the challenges of politics without some internal bearings, anchors and buoys; and those who become unmoored from moral scruples and constraints – who, in Arthur Koestler's term, sail without moral “ballast” – are unlikely to steer in ways that benefit either liberal institutions, or those who are vulnerable or victimized. One of the insights at the heart of liberalism is the recognition that certain limitations on what people can or will seek to do to others are needed to protect freedom and justice against oppression and crime, given the pervasive limitations and flaws of human beings; the intrinsic costs and evils of coercion and domination; and the tendency of power to make men and women jealous, intolerant, controlling and unjust – along with power's incapacity to make them understanding and wise. This wisdom should not be surrendered too quickly. But nor is it enough to show how to respond to situations of sharp crisis, or enduring injustice.

This model of fortitude is distinctly liberal – and must be distinguished from that “totalitarian fortitude”, all too familiar in the twentieth century, which appealed to either the “ethos of responsibility” associated with the tradition of *realpolitik*, or the “ethos of purity” associated with revolutionary politics. Thus, we find no less an enemy of liberalism (and humanity) than Heinrich Himmler declaring that “to have stuck it out and, apart from exceptions caused by human weakness, to have remained decent. That is what has made us hard ... we

realized that what we are expecting from you is 'superhuman', to be 'superhumanly inhuman'".<sup>1042</sup> We may note the perversion of language – what can it possibly mean to say that, in their massacres of unarmed victims by machine-gun, fire and gas, the men of the SS remained decent? – as well as the vulgar posturing. But there is also something worrisome here for our praise of liberal fortitude: a reminder that self-discipline in the pursuit of an ideal that one believes to be right, and in defiance of one's own human “weaknesses”, may be invoked not only on behalf of toleration and respect and against hatred, vengeance, intolerance and certainty; but also on behalf of cruelty and against compassion and mercy.

Therefore, sustaining a truly liberal posture of fortitude depends not only on a sense of integrity, but a sensibility of *humanity* – the perception of others' humanity, in all of its frailty and complexity, and the sense that those others are fellow-creatures who call forth sympathy, compassion, and a basic degree of respect; and a sense of *decency* – that is, a sense of what sorts of conduct are demanded or permitted by full recognition of the humanity of others. Decency is not enough. But decency is an indispensable ingredient or element in politics and personal conduct: we cannot do without it – or rather, what we do without it will poison the goals that we seek to achieve, if those goals were ever worth pursuit in the first place.

“Humanity” is not only a matter of sentiment, but of sensibility: of what perceptions that we develop and pay attention to, and the priority that we give them. The conception of a sense of humanity involved in the tempered liberalism presented here stresses the importance of attending to the immediate and the particular: to actual human beings, and our relations with them. In this regard, tempered liberals align with Bernard Williams: “The significance of the immediate

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<sup>1042</sup> Quoted in Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin, 1994 [1963]), 105.

should not be underestimated. Philosophers, not only utilitarian ones, repeatedly urge one to view the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, but for most human purposes that is not a good *species* to view it under”.<sup>1043</sup>

Following this exhortation to attend to particulars, we can get a more concrete sense of the importance, both of an ethos of humanity which fixes its attention on actual individual human beings here-and-now, and of a sense of honor and responsibility which reject both pure self-interest and moral self-involvement, through a brief look at Tzvetan Todorov's examination of the moral-psychological dynamics of Nazi-occupied France. Todorov shows how inhumanity – and thus, the taking or sacrifice of human lives – on *both* sides (the Vichy militias and the Resistance) was inspired by a combination of moral pride and rigid adherence to principle or doctrine, and blindness to actual human suffering (forms of moralistic or ideological ruthlessness) with a concern for personal power and repute (a form of “realist” ruthlessness). Self-righteousness and self-involvement (and self-promotion) are closely linked, and contribute to a disregard of the lives of others. This contrasts with the outlook of those who attempted to mediate between the authorities and the Resistance in the midst of a hostage situation, so as to save lives on both sides: they do not demand sacrifice from others, but put their own necks out to prevent bloodshed – and place “the dignity and lives of human beings” above the ideological slogans of “the *maquis* and the militia alike.”<sup>1044</sup>

The sense of humanity, and “moral identity” (that is, integrity), are identified by Jonathan Glover as the key “moral resources” for avoiding atrocity, based on his own consideration of

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<sup>1043</sup> Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism”, 118.

<sup>1044</sup> Todorov, *A French Tragedy: Scenes of Civil War, Summer 1944* trans. Mary Byrd Kelly and Richard J. Golsan (University Press of New England, 1996), 72.



twentieth-century politics.<sup>1045</sup> Tempered liberalism agrees with Glover on this; but also stresses the importance of having a sense that we have a responsibility to try to get our perceptions of situations and judgments about actions right, so that we can act effectively and usefully; and the ethic of thoughtfulness and rigor that accompany this sense of responsibility. The “realistic” and “idealistic” components of tempered liberalism are ultimately not separable; they have affinities and overlaps – and they demand one another. For the lack of either will lead to a loss of that balance which is necessary to be both realistic about ethics, and morally decent about practical politics.

As this suggests, for tempered liberalism both politics and ethics are conceived of in terms of the difficult art of balance. Tempered liberalism thus embraces *ethical moderation*. This is not the moderation of always splitting the difference – or of a “middle ground of perfect harmony ... having your cake and eating it too”.<sup>1046</sup> It is rather a moderation that, as Camus wrote, is “nothing but pure tension”, which seeks a “difficult path” – one which winds, in sensitive response to circumstances – between opposed extremes.<sup>1047</sup> The image frequently evoked by liberals of this cast of mind is the (somewhat hackneyed) myth of Scylla and Charybdis – the opposite and equal dangers menacing on either side. Sometimes the path between them is wide and clear; but in some circumstances it is narrow indeed. And sometimes Scylla and Charybdis join together.

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<sup>1045</sup> Glover, *Humanity, passim*, particularly 22-31, 274-83, 349-55, 401-14.

<sup>1046</sup> Maloy, *Democratic Statecraft*, 5.

<sup>1047</sup> *The Rebel*, 290, 301.

The primary Scylla and Charybdis encountered here are the poles of purism and cynicism, a fanatical idealism and a brutal realism; the aim of the liberals I have studied – and my study of them – has been to find a way to inhabit that “space between cynicism and political idiocy”. Those who inhabit that space, as Williams wrote, “need not be as pure as all that” – indeed, I have suggested, they will do a better job if they abandon the notion of purity – “so long as they retain some active sense of moral costs and moral limits” – and so long as they can avoid being “excessively pious”, without thereby becoming unscrupulous.<sup>1048</sup>

Moderation thus involves maintaining a sense of *limits* (as Camus, once again, stressed) – and, at the same time, retaining a prudential flexibility, to calibrate one's actions to events. This may mean stressing one element – “realism” or “idealism” (or, to take another polarity that tempered liberalism sought to maintain in balance, humility, flexibility, and open-mindedness on one end, and the pride of integrity and fidelity to conscience on the other) – more, in order to redress an imbalance in favor of the other.<sup>1049</sup> But we must always be wary of forgetting the importance of that which we can take for granted in certain contexts. Moderation means guarding against one-sidedness or single-mindedness – maintaining a multi-focal perspective, because any single-minded attempt to achieve some one end or ideal above all leads to terrible human sacrifice.<sup>1050</sup>

We should also recognize how ruthless realism and rigid idealism often go together. To take one recent example: the doctrinaire and self-righteous discourse of championing freedom

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<sup>1048</sup> Williams, “Politics and Moral Character”, 68-9.

<sup>1049</sup> See Maloy op.cit.

<sup>1050</sup> Cf. Kopelev, *No Jail for Thought*, 11.

and democracy embraced by Americana and British leaders in the wake of the attacks of September 11 2001 went hand-in-hand with a ruthless *realpolitik* which sought to demonstrate American might through military invasion, and did not scruple at the use of torture and fraud, or alliance with anti-democratic and anti-liberal elements around the world. Similarly, the American bombing of Cambodia – a campaign the consequences of which were as disastrous as its motivation was dubious – was the work of “realists” who coldly disregarded moral considerations, and not of idealistic crusaders.<sup>1051</sup> “Idealism” can serve as a screen for a brutal realism; appeals to a seemingly sober “realism” can serve as screens for ideological dogmatism and fanaticism. Perhaps the most important sort of “realism” to cultivate is sensitivity to the ways in which such disguises work – whether consciously or unconsciously, and whether in the minds and mouths of our rulers, or our own perceptions and judgments.<sup>1052</sup> The exponents of tempered liberalism had the wisdom (for all their undeniable failings) to recognize the dangers that inhere *both* in a “realistic” rejection of binding moral principles, which impose not merely pragmatic constraints on the pursuit of power and success; *and* of a moral absolutism blind to considerations of circumstances, feasibility, and responsibility. Both of these stances evaded the hard questions of political decision and ignored the particular claims and needs of particular people. These two tendencies were particularly dangerous in combination, fostering a ruthless fanaticism in which amorality and cynicism about means was combined with dogmatic absolutism about ends.

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<sup>1051</sup> See Glover, *Humanity*, 300-302.

<sup>1052</sup> Cf. Aaron Garrett, “Courage, Political Resistance, and Self-Deceit”; Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 11-12; Williams, “Truth, Politics, and Self-Deception”, *IBWD*, 154-64.

Emulating this tempered liberal approach, with its ethic and ethos of moderation, will shape how we pursue policies; it may also guide us in deciding what policies we will pursue, or reject, in the first place. To return to the case of war: the skepticism of tempered liberalism will rule out both strident, self-righteous, and dogmatic anti-war and pro-war positions. While anti-absolutism and responsibility point to willingness to use power for good, and “realism” points to need to sometimes use force, awareness of the evils of ruthlessness and dangers of self-righteousness will discourage the arrogance of thinking that we can, should, or may subject the world to our will.

This is, of course, a very demanding (and, at the same time, an imprecise) model. The very demandingness of this ethos, as well as (or combined with) its somberness, may strike some as not particularly liberal – insofar as liberalism is often regarded as easy-going and permissive, sunny and optimistic. A major argument of Niebuhr and Berlin – and, to a lesser extent, Michnik – is that the strain of optimism and confidence, even complacency, that had often predominated in liberalism needed to be repudiated in response to recent political experience. They, and other tempered liberals, also rejected the idea that, in preaching tolerance and forbearance, liberalism was morally undemanding. As Shklar wrote, liberalism “imposes extraordinary ethical difficulties on us”. The alternative we face

is not one between classical virtue and liberal self-indulgence, but between cruel military and moral repression and violence, and a self-restraining tolerance that fences in the powerful to protect the freedom and safety of every citizen ... Far from being an amoral free-for-all, liberalism is, in fact, extremely difficult and constraining, far too much so for those who cannot endure contradiction, complexity, diversity, and the risks of freedom.<sup>1053</sup>

There are other reasons why we might doubt that this ethos is specifically, or

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<sup>1053</sup> Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 248-9, 5.

appropriately, liberal – and why we might doubt the liberal *bona fides* of a view like “tempered liberalism” that is built around it.. It seems distinctly *conservative* in its emphasis on restraint in pursuit of values, and awareness of limitations on human wisdom and virtue. It also – particularly in Weber's and Michnik's cases – involves appeals to honor and chivalry, as both standards for judging and restraining, and resources for motivating, political action; such language may strike many as having a quaintly feudal air. These features certainly distinguish tempered liberalism from more optimistically progressive variants of liberalism. But they are not necessarily conservative – or, at any rate, they do not necessarily point to political conservatism. This is partly because they are balanced by qualities of skepticism about the wisdom and virtue of many traditions, humane compassion for those who suffer under the current order,<sup>1054</sup> and a sense of the possibility of arranging society differently which is fed by both imagination and historical knowledge. Or perhaps we should say that the “conservative” elements of tempered liberalism are rather *completed*, in these ways. Skepticism concerning human wisdom and consciousness of human sinfulness are turned on the forces of authority (as in Niebuhr's thought) and on traditional assumptions; a sense of honor and chivalry are seen as pointing away, both from the utilitarian and narrowly egoistic elements of classical liberalism, and the oppression and complacency about injustice of conservatism; chivalry is seen as pointing to a defense of the vulnerable against the mighty. Other, more liberal (and democratic) elements – modesty, a self-searching and self-deprecatory temper – play an important role in protecting against these elements giving rise to a stance of *noblesse oblige*; but these supposedly conservative elements already push some way toward a reformist, anti-authoritarian liberalism.

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<sup>1054</sup> Cf. Allen, “The Place of Negative Morality”, 359, 363n.42.

It is certainly true that the ethos described here, while developed (for the most part) as part of a project of reconstructing and defending liberalism, can also be distinguished from, and seen as qualifying, liberalism: non-liberals can exhibit this ethos, and liberals can fail to do so. This ethos does not entail, and is not entailed by, affirmation of liberalism as a philosophy, or commitment to the particular policies conventionally identified with liberalism. But embracing and internalizing this ethos will lead one to move closer to liberalism, insofar as it pushes toward a *limited* conception of politics, a protection of difference and dissent, an aversion to drastic action and fanaticism, a respect for individual self-determination. Many elements of the tempered liberal ethos are features associated with – or, I believe, implied or demanded by the commitments of – liberalism at various times and in various forms;<sup>1055</sup> others reflect the particular demands imposed upon liberalism by the challenge of political ruthlessness. Both are distinctively liberal, in the sense of being inspired by, and inspiring, a liberal commitment to imposing ethical and institutional limits on the pursuit and use of political power, for the sake of safeguarding individuals against oppression and terror, and promoting a society marked by both individual freedom and order.

Beside the worry that the ethos of tempered liberalism isn't particularly liberal, there is a worry that it is all too liberal: that it endorses those features of liberalism that are, precisely, the problem with liberalism. Critics often charge that liberalism's very modesty, skepticism, and studied ambivalence – its lack of certainty, burning passion (even its lack of hatred and anger), firm resolution – are the source of its weakness, its political ineffectuality. In the “rush to certainty”, liberalism “quakes and at times collapses, its adherents unable and unwilling to

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<sup>1055</sup> This assertion could, I believe, be born out by a detailed comparison of the figures discussed here with earlier figures such as Smith Constant, de Stael, Tocqueville, and Mill; but I am unable to pursue that project here.

embrace fundamental dogmas of their own and incapable of effectively challenging those who do.” Opponents from the Right and Left – and even sympathetic critics from what one might call the Communitarian and Populist center – identify this lack of conviction and passion as among liberalism's chief intellectual and practical failings.<sup>1056</sup> Liberals, too, sometimes succumb to this view (as Niebuhr in his youth, Weber at moments throughout his life, and Berlin in moments of doubt, did). Some good liberals have suggested that a certain amount of utopian optimism and ambition is necessary.<sup>1057</sup> Others see a need for some none-too-liberal toughness; thus Alan Ryan has written, reflecting on the argument over ends and means between Dewey and Trotsky, “We would breathe more easily in a world where Dewey's politics were the rule, but if it came to a fight, it might be better to ride into battle behind Trotsky.”<sup>1058</sup>

The point here is valid, and important – though one might respond that, if one had Trotsky leading one's side, it would not remain a side which one could morally decently support. Yet Ryan also points to one of the impulses driving this study: that if the choice is between the ruthlessness of Trotsky, and the more hopeful liberalism of Dewey, with its traces of Hegelian progressivism, we are in a difficult position indeed. The turn to the “tempered liberalism” I have identified in (or sought to extract from) Niebuhr, Berlin, and Michnik (and, more ambiguously, Weber) is meant to offer an alternative which, while it accepts and adheres to Dewey's insight about the flaws in Trotsky's treatment of ends and means, grapples with the ethical problems of

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<sup>1056</sup> Alan Brinkley, “Liberalism and Belief” in Neil Jumonville and Kevin Mattson, eds. *Liberalism for a New Century* (University of California Press, 2007), 75, 76-7.

<sup>1057</sup> See e.g. Kateb, *Utopia and its Enemies* (The Free Press, 1964); Shklar, “What is the Use of Utopia?”, *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, 190; Walzer, “Should We Reclaim Political Utopianism?”, *European Journal of Political Theory* 12:1 (January 2013), 24-30.

<sup>1058</sup> Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (Norton, 1997), 308.

politics more acutely than Dewey's tendency to assimilate politics to collaborative problem-solving.

Nevertheless, this liberalism remains decidedly on Dewey's side, not only in political prescriptions, but in ethical analysis – in insisting that ends and means cannot be cleanly separated. Means (understood to involve not only particular actions, but the ethos informing and connecting them) contrary to the ends at which they aim undermine those ends. Lukacs, before his leap into Bolshevism, had stated the problem well: “can good be achieved through evil means, and freedom by tyranny; can a new world be achieved if the instruments of its realization are only technically different from the justly abhorred methods of the old order?”<sup>1059</sup> Nearly a century after Lukacs, Michnik (another Central European Jewish intellectual dedicated to moral ideals and political efficacy) repeated the question: “Can crime be annihilated with another crime? Or does that crime inevitably breed another crime?”<sup>1060</sup> Lukacs's ultimate attempt to lie his way to truth, to lead his fellowmen down the road to emancipation through tyranny, was a moral disaster; Michnik's road, bumpy as it has been, has proven better.

The battle for the ideals, goals, principles, and broader political culture of liberalism will be lost, if the spirit in which the battle is waged becomes an illiberal one. This should be cause – as Berlin, Niebuhr, and Michnik realized – for vigilance rather than self-congratulation on the part of liberals. There is always a danger that those who seek to combat ruthlessness, extremism, and fanaticism will come to adopt the outlook of their adversaries: that, convinced of their own rectitude and the over-riding importance of their goals, they will be ready to violate liberal

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<sup>1059</sup> “Bolshevism as an Ethical Problem”, 218-19.

<sup>1060</sup> Michnik, *The Trouble with History*, 166.



constraints and compromise (or betray) democratic principles in pursuit of their mission.

As with anti-liberalism, this liberal fanaticism can be bolstered by claims to a “realist” understanding of political realities – the belief that the militant democrat (or, in Michnik's term, the anti-Communist with a Bolshevik face) knows the truth about a dangerous world, and that this knowledge justifies them in doing what needs to be done – even if this goes against the norms of a liberal democracy. A review of the record of anti-Communism makes the point all too clear; we can take one exemplary case as illustration. Bill Colby was the CIA official responsible for running the “Phoenix Program” – a program of infiltration, abduction, torture, and murder designed to “neutralize” the Viet Cong. He was thus no stranger to brutality and ruthlessness. He was also “a romantic idealist, a liberal internationalist who wanted to replace fascist or Communist tyranny with freedom and democracy ... Like Lawrence of Arabia, he was willing to kill and betray for a romantic cause”.<sup>1061</sup>

Such extremes of ruthlessness offer particularly clear examples; but they are not the only ones, and are to some extent too easy. There are other ways of pursuing liberal ends in an illiberal or anti-liberal spirit, with which we are more familiar, even involved: for instance, the dogmatic imposition of enlightened principles – even of conceptions of human rights – on vulnerable and resistant minorities; or the technocratic and coercive imposition of neo-liberal economic policies on vulnerable nations.<sup>1062</sup> Liberalism should learn from its own past errors – and from the sins and disasters of its ideological competitors. Kautsky's warning to his fellow

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<sup>1061</sup> Evan Thomas, “The Gray Man”, *New York Times Book Review* May 3, 2013. Cf. Goldfarb, *After Glasnost*, 165-6 (citing the example of Oliver North).

<sup>1062</sup> I am grateful to my friend Michael Lesley for discussions of the former sort of case; on the latter, see William Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor* (Basic Books, 2014).

socialists, quoted at the start of this chapter, is apposite. So is the warning issued in 1930 by Hermann Mueller, the Social-Democratic Chancellor of Germany, of the dangers faced by a “democracy without democrats”. We should, similarly, beware of the possibility of a liberalism without liberals.

Over the past decade we have seen a recurrence of the tendencies either to abandon liberalism in favor of more radical approaches that promise transformation and indeed salvation, at the cost of violating the constraints – institutional and moral – insisted upon by liberalism; or to pursue liberal (or democratic) projects in a manner that apes the hardness, dogmatism, ruthlessness and righteousness of the anti-liberal mindset. Reading the polemics of the interwar and post-World War II period and those of the past decade in light of one another, one is struck by the continuing vigor of that line of thought that says that liberal-democratic institutions should be affirmed against their critics, but that liberals need to toughen up, and adopt some of the militancy and ruthlessness of those who oppose them.

Liberals *should* “toughen up”; but “toughening up” should not be understood to mean becoming unscrupulous, bellicose, or inflexible. And even *if* toughness is understood in terms of a resolve and fortitude that can bear uncertainty, reversal, and the malevolence and irrationality of others patiently – the sort of toughness counseled by Weber in the concluding pages of “Politics as a Vocation” – liberals should be careful not to toughen up *too much*: for a degree of flexibility, modesty, and humility are among the great strengths of liberalism worth preserving. “Houses for free men”, as both Herzen and Michnik asserted, “cannot be built from the stones of prisons” – and cannot be constructed by, or entrusted, to people with the mentality of jailers.

This line of thought, of course, assumes a commitment to liberal principles to begin with; it is an argument for adherence to a liberal ethos *by liberals* (or *soi-disant* liberals) – a call to liberals to put their minds where their mouths are, to exhibit liberal qualities of character in pursuing liberal goals or preaching liberal principles.

**D. Ethos Without the Ideal: Sisyphean Liberalism**

As I have tried to show, ethos is a matter not only of dispositions, ethical perceptions (such as the view on the relationship between means and ends sketched above), and commitment to certain values. It is also a matter of how and what we perceive, and how we respond to our perceptions. This is reflected in tempered liberals' perception of the nature of politics, and their wariness of extremes and sensitivity to suffering – and in their conception of time. The importance of the *temporal* imagination by which ethical reflection is guided is suggested by the centrality to anti-liberal thought and action of an outlook which fixated on the future, and thus devalued the present. Thus Kopelev recalled how in “the name of the noblest visions promising eternal happiness to their descendants” his fellow-Communists had brought “merciless ruin on their contemporaries. Bestowing paradise on the dead, they maim and destroy the living.” Such people, he charged, “become unprincipled liars and unrelenting executioners, all the while seeing themselves as virtuous and honorable militants – convinced that if they are forced into villainy, it is for the sake of future good, and that if they have to lie, it is in the name of eternal truths”,<sup>1063</sup>

Tempered liberalism, reacting against this tendency, cultivated a temporal imagination of its own. There are two elements to this temporal imagination. First, as we have seen, is a

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<sup>1063</sup> Kopelev, *No Jail for Thought*, 11-12.

tendency to prioritize the immediate – and to be wary of sacrificing too much for the sake of future felicity. The second is a view of history that recognizes variation as well as recurrence, and rejects both the model of progress, and that of stasis. It rejects the hope of teleology – of steady movement toward, let alone achievement of, some ultimate goal – while remaining aware that we do have the power to change our circumstances – and perhaps, to make them somewhat better. And because tempered liberalism maintains a humane ethical perspective, it also accepts a responsibility to try to achieve such improvement.

Tempered liberalism is a liberalism formed by the memory of terror, and the awareness that “new totalitarian utopias wait all around us, in new phraesologies and alluring forms, whether egalitarian or elitist, nationalist or universalist, atheist or religious.”<sup>1064</sup> It does not lack positive ideals, or define itself *solely* in relation to that which it opposes; but it gives priority to protecting against cruelty and suffering, and is inspired and guided by, in pursuing the good, by a consciousness of danger. It favors thoughtfulness, and a degree of hesitancy or tentativeness, scrupulousness, humility, and irony, against ruthlessness, certainty, and haste – remembering, as Berlin wrote, that “We may take the risk of drastic action, in personal life or in public policy, but we must always be aware, never forget, that we may be mistaken, that certainty about the effect of such measures invariably leads to avoidable suffering of the innocent.”<sup>1065</sup>

Such a perspective has its relevance in relatively peaceful, stable times; it will be all the more important when facing dangers and drastic challenges. It also has something to say to us even when the challenges we face cannot be overcome. In some cases the times are just evil; but

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<sup>1064</sup> Michnik *The Church and the Left*, 238.

<sup>1065</sup> Berlin, “Pursuit of the Ideal”, 17.

one need not become evil with them. With judgment and humanity, forbearance and humility, one can “say no” – one can “refuse to join in the dance of death” and cruelty around one, or “contribute too much to its ravages”.<sup>1066</sup> This may not seem like much of a political program; but it is the ethical point from which any dependably decent politics must start. The struggle for a better (never a perfect) world – a world of less cruelty and suffering, humiliation and deprivation, of greater and more justly distributed freedom, respect, safety and opportunity – must continue, unendingly. But it is a struggle that must be carried out in a way that does not poison the goals at which it aims and the ideals that inspire it, and that does not corrupt or morally coarsen those who carry it out, or destroy or humiliate those who are its victims.

The temptations to embrace absolute stances and drastic measures, in the face of seemingly intractable problems, terrible suffering and injustice, and looming crisis, is a strong one. It may be particularly strong again today, as liberal democracy once again seems impotent to address the problems confronting it. “Only a god can save us now” Heidegger famously intoned. Looking for a God – for certainty, for omnipotence, for perfection, for salvation – has been part of the problem, though. If we are to be saved – where “saved” has the quotidian meaning of being protected and preserved against danger, disaster, and suffering – we should look not towards or for God(s) but towards *men* (and women) – and toward *good* men and women (*menschen* in the sense of the term specific to Yiddish). Not perfect, by any means – but decent, perceptive, responsible, sober, mature, humble, skeptical, self-searching, and enduring. Having good men and women set the tone for politics – and striving to be good, in politically relevant ways, when we bring our thoughts to bear on political issues, and act so as to affect

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<sup>1066</sup> Shklar, review of Jean Starobinski, *Montaigne in Motion*, *Political Theory* 15:4 (November 1987), 654.

them – will not solve everything; and a politics in which the tone is set by good men and women will seldom be attained, and never sustained for very long. But the quality of personality of those engaging in politics determines, at least in part (and in crucial part) what politics will be like and what it will yield. To create a decent world, we must become more decent; to create a tolerable world, we may have to go beyond the tolerably venal, to the modestly heroic.

Modesty, skepticism, and a sense of responsibility, honor, and limits all constitute crucial parts of the ethos of a political activist, which should limit and modulate, though not undermine or overwhelm, the activist's commitment to bringing change to society. They are no more than that: qualities of character, which will never be exemplified by every – and can never consistently be maintained by any – political actor. But recognizing the importance of such a character, in addition to motivating us to strive toward it, also reinforces a commitment to a political process and political institutions that may artificially achieve some of the same effects as the cultivation of such an ethos. At the same time, such institutional arrangements cannot endure without political actors who embrace the ethos and exhibit the qualities appropriate to a politics of human dignity and moral limits. Neither character nor institutions can be relied upon to work dependably; and so human values and social achievements are always fragile and endangered. The struggle for a more just world “will never be over. It is endless, like Sisyphus in hell, constantly pushing his huge boulder up to an unreachable hilltop.”<sup>1067</sup> A vision that recognizes the demands and limits of this struggle – and a political ethic and character that can withstand them – are necessary to protect against the dangers of political fanaticism and escapism. If we are to live up to our responsibilities, and maintain our dignity, as human beings

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“The Sisyphus of Democracy”, accessed online at [http://www.unesco.org/courier/2001\\_09/uk/dires.htm](http://www.unesco.org/courier/2001_09/uk/dires.htm)

and citizens, we must expect no more, and accept no less, than this imperfect, uncertain, and open-ended condition.